

# Harry Potter and The Order of the Phoenix

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## 1. Birthday Deliveries

It was a miserable day at number four Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey, England. For young Harry Potter, the reluctant fourth occupant of the house, it was not the gloomy layer of rolling clouds that hung overhead, it was not the constant rainfall that had been persisting for the last week, it was not the fact that he wanted to be at Privet Drive, in the presence of his less than loving relatives, about as much as he wanted to have another duel with Voldemort.

It was none of these things that had caused the pall of depression that hung over him.

No, for today was the one day of the year that Harry Potter never looked forward to.

It was July 31st.

It was his birthday.

And after having spent ten years of his life never having his birthday acknowledged in any form, no presents, no cards, no party, not even a lack lustre "Happy Birthday" from his aunt or uncle, Harry attached very little importance to the day.

Even after four years at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where he had met his two best friends, Harry still half expected to receive nothing in way muted celebration.

Thus he could not help a slight start when a tap at his bedroom window proved to be the arrival of seven owls. Harry glanced back at his own owl, Hedwig, with raised eyebrows. He had never had so many letters and gifts arrive for him at once. Opening the window, Harry ducked out of the way as the owls swept into his small room, finding perches on his bed, his desk, some shelves and in the case of Ron's owl, Pigwidgeon, not perching at all, but zooming about like a small, grey and fluffy Snitch. Reaching up to snag the diminutive owl, Harry looked over the other six. One, an old, decrepit owl, he recognized as the Weasley family's owl, Errol, who had collapsed on his bed in a heap of ruffled feathers. Perched above Errol, on the headboard, he saw Hermes which was Percy Weasley's owl. The other four, after close inspection proved to be unknown to him.

Collecting the various letters and packages from the owls, Harry settled down on his bed to take stock of all he had received this year. All-in-all, seven people had sent him presents, actually eight if you split up Fred and George, along with a bulging letter from Hogwarts.

First, delivered by Pig was Ron, whose letter Harry eagerly opened, his usual birthday gloom dispersed with the reminder that his friends would not actually forget him. Leaning back against the wall he began trying to decipher his Ron's almost illegible scrawl.

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Dear Harry,

Happy Birthday, mate!

I hope you like the gifts, for once I've taken a page out of Hermione's - can you believe she's actually thinking about going to Bulgaria to visit that pompous oaf, Krum? What is she thinking? Anyway, I've taken a page out of the bookworm's library and have sent you something to read.

Maybe now you'll actually be able to play a game of chess with me and not get insulted by your chess pieces, but I wouldn't bet on it. Anyhow, I hope you like the book and the poster I sent with it - now you finally have something Quidditch to put in your room!

I've been pestering Mum and Dad to ask Dumbledore if you could come to the Burrow for the rest of the summer, but they still haven't gotten anything out of him. I hope the Muggles aren't giving you too much grief.

Best wishes,

Ron

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PS.

If we can't arrange something, we're going to Diagon Alley on the 28th, maybe we'll see you then if you can get the Muggles to let you come.

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Smiling at his friend's enthusiastic rantings, and trying to ignore a wave of disappointment that he still couldn't escape the Dursleys, Harry tore open the large package. As he had guessed from the letter, his primary gift was a book on how to play chess; *Conquering the Sixty Four Squares*, by Vyacheslav Gorbunov. Fortunately it was the english version as Harry's russian was limited to saying "da" and "nyet".

Alongside the book was a poster of, naturally, Ron's favourite Quidditch League team, the Chudley Cannons. Decked out in their vibrant orange and black uniforms the seven players zoomed about the poster on their brooms, Quaffle, Bludgers and the Golden Snitch zipping around and about between them all.

Next Harry opened the letter and gift from his other best friend and near constant companion, Hermione Granger, who had used a mail service owl to make the delivery. He started reading the

letter, Hermione's writing as clean and precise as Ron's was messy and scrawled.

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Dear Harry,  
Happy Birthday!

I hope you're not having any troubles at home and have been able to finish your homework without interruption - you do know we have OWLs this year! You're a very hard person to shop for Harry, I have to tell you. I think I've managed to get a couple of things you'll find useful or interesting. I'm currently thinking of going to visit Viktor in Bulgaria, you remember he invited me? Although I'm not really sure I want to go, by myself especially, I'm almost considering it just to spite Ron, that boy is become quite infuriating about it. In fact, his last letter was almost what I would call rude! He says he's trying to get his parents to arrange with Dumbledore to have you go to the Burrow for the end of summer, and I hope he succeeds - being stuck with the Dursleys for your entire holiday cannot be good for you.

If everything works out, I'll see you at Diagon Alley on the 28th, where I'll be meeting up with the Weasleys and then staying with them until term starts.

With love,  
Hermione

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Shaking his head over how his two best friend tended to fight over something so insignificant as a visit overseas, Harry unwrapped the present and pulled forth a pair of thick books. The one was a book on Quidditch of all things, which surprised Harry as Hermione had very little interest in the sport besides coming to watch any games Harry was playing in.

The second book, however, gave him pause. It was a thick, leather bound book on curses and hexes, both how to use them and how to avoid them. This was an altogether unwelcome reminder that Lord Voldemort had succeeded in being resurrected only a month ago, something Harry did not want to dwell on considering the circumstances surrounding that resurrection.

*'Still,' he thought, 'I suppose it will be useful, like Hermione said.'*

Next he read the letter from Mrs Weasley, Ron's mother. Her note and package had been delivered by Errol, who seemed half dead after accomplishing his task. It was mostly a rehash of what Ron had said - that they were trying to get Dumbledore to allow Harry to stay with them for the rest of the summer, but so far the headmaster was continuing his opposition to the idea.

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Unwrapping the present, Harry grinned and immediately stored the bundle of food; a birthday cake, some cupcakes, homemade fudge and an assortment of sweets, in the secret area he had discovered under a loose floorboard beneath his bed.

Harry was about to open the next gift, which had also come with Errol, but paused to consider. The handwriting was not overly familiar to him, but he recognised it as belonging to the youngest of the Weasley children, Ginny. Thinking back to his second year and a certain singing valentine as well as a get well card in his third year, which had also sang, and Harry decided to open her gift last. It was not that he had anything against Ginny, but looking at his alarm clock, which displayed that it was only twenty past three in the morning, Harry shuddered at the thought of the Dursleys's being woken from their slumber by any shrill singing that might accompany Ginny's gift.

*'Best to get the other presents out of the way first,' he decided, 'Just in case.'*

The next letter had come attached to Hermes and Harry was not overly surprised to see that the prankster twins, Fred and George, had appropriated Percy's owl to deliver their gift. He could almost imagine Percy's reaction if he ever found out. Again, just before he opened the letter, Harry paused although for a somewhat different reason. This time it was not the fear of singing that worried him, but the chance that something... odd... might happen. The twins were renowned for their ability to play jokes on just about anyone and Harry had long since resolved to never eat any food offered to him by either of the pair. But did that extend to letters?

*'My luck,' he mused, 'it will turn me into a goose. Or a mallard.'*

Tempting fate, and resigning himself to whatever the twins saw fit to do to him, Harry carefully unfolded the letter and braced for impact. After several moments passed and nothing happened, he began reading.

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Harry, mate!  
Happy Birthday, partner!

Yes, that's right - partner. After your generous donation of funds to the worthy cause of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, the pair of us have decided that you deserve to have an equal share in our future company. Here the handwriting and ink changed as the twins obviously swapped around. It is thus that we have delivered to you, on this momentous day, a fully stocked starter pack of Wheezes, accompanied by a list and descriptions of every product we are thus far ready to market. Again the writing changed. Feel free to test any and all of them on that delightful cousin of yours! You know you want to... Back to the other twin. In accordance with the instructions you left us with when last we saw you, we will be purchasing ickle Ronniekins a set of new, latest fashion, dressrobes for any future occasion he might require. Do you think our baby brother would look good in lilac? And one final change over. As for the rest of our present, don't drink them all at once. We know it's light, except for house-elves, but you're almost small enough to be one! Enjoy and hope to see you at either the Burrow or in London.

Many thanks and congratulations,  
Gred and Forge  
Chief Executive Wizards,  
Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes

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Grinning broadly Harry open their package and quickly browsed through their starter pack, which was loaded with enough stuff to earn any student a lifetime of detentions. As for the last part of the letter, that became clear when Harry uncovered a packet of five bottles of butterbeer, the wizarding drink of choice for Hogwarts students.

The next gift was a long, thin and exceptionally heavy one, Harry was amazed the poor owl that had delivered it had not collapsed from exhaustion. A note was attached and he recognized the untidy writing as that belonging to Hagrid, his first true friend.

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Harry,  
Happy Birthday, I hope you're enjoying it!  
I can't write much, seeing as I'm on an important mission for Dumbledore, but I couldn't very well not send you a birthday present now, could I?  
I hope you like the dagger, apparently it's been in my family for generations.  
All the best,  
Hagrid

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Harry read the note again and then stared at the package. A dagger? Impossible, the thing was nearly four feet long and was almost as heavy as his trunk! Still, intrigued, he tore away the brown wrapping paper and found himself holding a plain, but well crafted, broadsword. Glancing at the note, Harry suddenly realized that it was in fact a dagger.

A giant's dagger.

Hagrid was half-giant himself and Harry could remember Dumbledore talking to him about going on a mission to visit the reclusive giants as an envoy of peace. If Hagrid had said that the dagger was a family heirloom, that could only mean that he had found his mother, the giantess Fridwulfa.

Harry looked at the dagger with newfound respect. If this was just a dagger, how big would a giant's sword be? Gripping the hilt with both hand Harry could barely lift the heavy blade, it was easily the size of a normal human-sized broadsword, and a good bit heavier than the sword of Godric Gryffindor Harry had used in his second year.

The last gift, aside from Ginny's, was a curiously shaped bundle, the type which Harry usually associated with the jumpers Mrs Weasley knitted for Christmas. This time, however, the gift was not from the Weasley matriarch, but from his Godfather, the infamous Sirius Black.

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Harry,  
Happy Birthday!  
I hope you're enjoying yourself, or as much as you can stuck with the Muggles - if they give you any trouble, let me know. I don't think I'll be able to drop by, but I'm sure a carefully phrased letter will be more than enough to put them in line.  
I hope you like your present, I was staying at Remus Lupin's house when we found it in a box up in his attic. It's a trenchrobe, the wizard equivalent of a Muggle trenchcoat, and it was once your father's. He used to wear it all the time when the Marauder's went out partying, but stopped after he married your mother. James would have wanted you to have it, even if I don't think you're quite tall enough for it yet.  
I may be a little difficult to get hold of for a few months, so sent any letters you may have to either Remus or Professor Dumbledore and they will pass them on to me.

Sirius

PS,

Remus sends his regards and says he'll see you sooner than you think.

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For a moment Harry mulled over the last line. His old Defence Against the Dark Arts professor said he would be seeing Harry soon? But his thoughts on this did not last long and within moments Harry was tearing at the package, pulling out his father's old robe.

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It was black leather and very similar to the trenchcoats Harry had seen on television and in his occasional excursions into Muggle London. Harry immediately shucked it on and found that Sirius had been correct, the trenchrobe was a good deal too large for him. His arms and hands were lost in the sleeves and nearly half a foot of the garment dragged along the floor. He didn't have a mirror in his room, but he could tell that at first glance it could almost pass for an ordinary robe, but was still distinct enough that a second glance would reveal it to be something more.

With the trenchrobe still on, Harry sank back onto his bed and picked up the final letter, this the only one without an accompanying package. It was his Hogwarts letter, written in beautiful emerald ink and with the Hogwarts seal.

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Dear Mr Potter,

Please note that the new school year will begin on September the first. The Hogwarts Express will leave from King's Cross Station, platform nine and three-quarters, at eleven o'clock.

It is also with great pleasure that we can inform you that you have been selected as one of the Gryffindor house Prefects. Please report to the Prefect's carriage on the Hogwarts Express where your duties and privileges shall be explained to you.

Congratulations on your appointment, we know you will uphold the integrity, honour and dedication that is expected of such a prestigious post.

A list of required books and equipment is enclosed.

Your sincerely,  
Professor M. McGonagall  
Deputy Headmistress

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Prefect? He was a prefect? Harry knew Dumbledore was slightly mad, after all he was Dumbledore, but this, Harry felt, was a clear indication that the rest of the Hogwarts staff were not all that far behind their headmaster.

Reaching into the envelope, Harry withdrew the list of books and stuff he'd be needing and then pulled free a gleaming silver badge. He had never expected, at least not for himself - Hermione, yes, but not himself - to be chosen as a Prefect. After all his adventures, not to mention the many detentions and the fact that he had probably broken, or at least bent, every rule Hogwarts had.

"Ron and Hermione will *never* believe this," he whispered in amazement, "Hell, I *know* I don't."

Setting his Prefect badge, along with the letter and list, Harry turned his attention, finally, to Ginny's present. It was smaller than any of the others, quite a bit actually, and the letter was short and to the point as well. In fact, Harry was reminded very strongly of Ginny herself by all this. Since as long as he had known her, Ginny had been very embarrassed or uncomfortable in his presence, almost always blushing as red as her hair and more often than not making odd squeaking sounds before disappearing as fast as her legs could carry her.

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Dear Harry,  
Happy Birthday!

I hope you like the present I got you. I know it's not much really, and I don't even know you'll wear something like this, but when I saw it I had to get it for you. It just seemed... appropriate, somehow. I'm hoping Mum and Dad can convince Dumbledore to let you come and stay with us for the remainder of the holidays. Please don't let the Muggles get you down or anything.

Love,

Ginny  
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Harry read through the letter several times, amazed and pleasantly surprised by what Ginny had written. Despite having known Ron and his family for four years, now starting the fifth, Harry knew next to nothing about Ginny. Aside from the fact that she seemingly had a crush on him and he had saved her life during his second year, Harry could only recall having had just one short conversation with her. And Percy's prospective love life was not that interesting. He liked that she had written a letter to him, and liked even more that she seemed so much more at ease.

Carefully he picked up the small package and unwrapped it. It was the second leather item he had received for his birthday. It was a wristband, made up of eight knotted and interwoven cords of red and yellow tanned leather. Gryffindor colours. Slipping the loose band over his left hand, where his watch would normally be were it not broken, Harry tugged on the specially worked knots and tightened the band comfortably around his thin wrist.

Harry was considering this simple, yet thoughtful, gift when movement out the corner of his eye caught his attention. He looked up from where he was sitting on his bed and jerked back against the wall in astonishment.

"Holy shit!"

A phoenix had somehow found its way into his room, despite the fact that Harry had closed the window after Hermione's, Sirius', Hagrid's and the Hogwarts owls had departed. It was slightly larger than the only other phoenix Harry had ever seen. Unlike Fawkes, this bird fairly glowed an almost blinding white. Its crest, wings and tail feathers were tipped with gold and silver. Held firmly in its beak was a letter, which it dropped at Harry's feet.

Curious, and not feeling the least bit cautious - after all, would Voldemort send him anything via a phoenix of all things? In any event, Harry bent down and picked up the letter, looking it over in his hands. It was clearly, in flowing gold script, addressed to him, but it was not any handwriting that Harry recognised. The seal at the back of the envelope was made from a strange silver wax and the crest imprinted on it, shaped like a phoenix in flight, was gleaming a rich and deep gold, surrounded by the seal's silver.

Tentatively he broke the seal and unfolded the parchment, his curious gaze falling upon only seven words written in gleaming gold ink. Welcome, to the Order of the Phoenix. And then Harry Potter, the famous Boy Who Lived, was no longer to be found in Privet Drive.

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## 2. Correspondence

The rest of the summer:

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Ron,

Thanks a bunch for the book, although I have a feeling you're going to regret having got it for me. I've already started reading it and next time we play, I'm going to hand you your head and the heads of your chess pieces. And the best part is; you won't be able to blame me for it, since it was you that got me the book!

The poster's great as well, it certainly beats looking at a plain white wall for hours on end. I can't wait to see my aunt and uncle's expressions first time they spot it.

If your folks can arrange for me to come to the Burrow, great - the Muggles have been pretty much ignoring me, so I'm an inch away from dying of boredom over here. Good thing you and Hermione both sent me books. If I can't come, well, here's hoping I won't run out of reading material before school starts.

As for Hermione visiting Krum in Bulgaria, I wouldn't worry about it so much. If you put too much pressure on her, you'll just be forcing her hand. You wouldn't want her to do something just to prove her point, would you?

Extend my thanks to your mother, and the rest of your family, for the wonderful cake she sent, it's delicious and a godsend - Dudley's still on a diet, not that it's helping him any, he still looks like a beached whale.

With luck I'll see you soon, or at Diagon Alley on the 28th.

Many thanks,

Harry

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Dear Hermione,

Somehow I was expecting you to send me books. Thanks! You were right, of course, I'm finding them both useful and interesting. This will probably come as a bit of a surprise to you, but you weren't the only one to send me something to read. You won't believe it, but Ron, yes Ron, actually sent me a book too. Apparently he's hoping it will improve my wizard chess skills.

As for your visiting Krum, well, don't let anything Ron says influence your decision on the matter. It's your life and your choice, Ron needs to learn that. But whatever you do, don't do it just to spite him. You know how he is, it'll just make everything worse and remember what Dumbledore said last year. Now's the time we need to stick together.

I'm not sure if I'll be able to go to the Burrow this year, I certainly hope I will, but Dumbledore seems to think I need to stay here with the Dursleys for a time. One day I am going to find out the reasons for all this, but for the time being I think it's best that I follow orders.

"Follow orders" - Sounds like I'm in the army, doesn't it?

In any case, don't worry about me too much. I haven't had any trouble with dreams or my scar lately and the Dursleys have been leaving me alone for the most part. With luck I will see you at the Burrow or perhaps in London.

Thanks again,

Harry

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PS.

Watch out for Fred and George this year. I have a feeling they're putting their joke business into high gear. I wouldn't recommend eating anything given to you by anyone except Mrs Weasley and maybe Ginny.

\*\*\*

Dear Fred and George

You two are incorrigible, you know that? I'm actually surprised that the rest of your family are still redheads - I'd expect them to all have grey hair after so much exposure to the two of you!

Thanks heaps for the start pack, I'll be sure to put it to good use, if not here at the Dursleys then certainly at Hogwarts this year. I'm glad you're putting my "donation", as you called it, to such good use, though you really don't need to make me your partner in business, or should I say partner in crime? Just don't do anything to upset your mother too much and as for dressing Ron up in lilac robes, well, personally I think lime green would go better with his hair.

As for the butterbeer and your insinuation that I'm small enough to pass off as a house elf, I have news for you; I'm having a growth spurt. Either that or the engorgement charm you used in those Elephant Eats hasn't worn off.

See you both soon, I hope.

Harry,

Co-Chief Executive Wizard,

Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes

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Dear Ginny,

Thank you very much for the gift, it's one of the very few I received this year that did not remind me everything that's going on. Ron sent me a book about chess and strategic thinking, Hermione sent me a book on curses and hexes and Hagrid sent me a sword. Well, it's not really a sword, it's a giant's dagger, but the thing's nearly four foot long, so I'm calling it a sword anyway.

As for wearing it, well, ever since my wristwatch got broken when I went swimming around the lake last year my arm has been feeling kinda naked. It feels good to have something to wear on my wrist

again, almost comforting. And it's certainly appropriate, especially when it's done in Gryffindor colours.

Don't worry about the Muggles getting me down, as long as I have friends like you, Ron and Hermione to write to I'll be okay. I hope to see you soon, either at the Burrow or in another letter.

Thankfully yours,

Harry

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Hermione,

Just got a reply from Harry. Sounds like he's doing okay with those Muggles, at least he didn't mention anything about being locked up or starved or something. Then again, if there was anything wrong, would he tell us? He was very withdrawn at the end of the year which is understandable considering, but I'm worried that he may be deliberately pulling away from us.

So, have you decided to go to Bulgaria or not? I don't want to sound argumentative or anything like that, but I'm not sure it would be safe, especially now. I know you're not going to rush blindly about, sometimes I think you consider everything a bit too much, but I will promise to back you up regardless of your decision.

Just make sure you're back in time to meet Harry and the rest of us in Diagon Alley, he needs our support now more than ever. Even if he won't admit it.

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Ron

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Dear Hermione,

Omigod! Hermione, he wrote me a letter! He wrote back and thanked me for the present I sent him! I know it was just a thank you note, but he said he was hoping to hear from me again and he called me a friend, along with you and Ron.

Do you think I should write back? I mean, what if he was only being polite? I don't want him to get the wrong idea. It's bad enough I always blush whenever he looks at me, but I don't want him to think I'm even worse than that! What should I do?

With love,

Ginny

\*\*\*

Dear Ron,

I've just got a reply from Harry as well. He does sounds fine, but I agree with you, we'll have to keep a close eye on him this year. If there's one thing we can't let him do, it's distance himself from his friends.

As for going to visit Viktor, I still haven't decided. As I told Harry, I like the idea but would rather not go by myself. Unfortunately I don't think Viktor's invitation was extended to my parents as well as myself. I'll probably be giving him an answer by the end of the week.

Harry tells me you sent him a book on chess? I must say, I approve. It will do him good to start thinking in a more strategic and analytical fashion, particularly with what is lying ahead of us all. I sent him a book on curses and another about Quidditch, I think it's also important to keep his mind off things.

I'll be seeing you in London before school starts.

With love,

Hermione

PS.

Harry warned me to watch out for the twins when I get to the Burrow. Are they really up to as much mischief as he says? I get the feeling he knows something we don't.

\*\*\*

Dear Harry,

I'm glad you liked the books and am pleased you're finding them interesting. I just hope you're not neglecting all your homework by reading them instead. I know you have trouble doing it at the Dursleys, but don't waste any opportunities when you have them.

Did you talk to Ron about Viktor? He's suddenly become very understanding and I can't think of anything that could bring that about. If you did, I don't know whether or not to yell at you for interfering as well, or kiss you for talking sense into that boy.

I'm sure Dumbledore will let you go to the Weasleys before school starts and I'm certain that if he says that staying with the Dursleys in the mean time is a good idea then he's telling the truth. And remember, he's just the headmaster, not a general. So whatever you do, don't start saluting him when we get back to Hogwarts!

See you soon, with love,

Hermione

PS.

What do you know about Fred and George's activities that the rest of us don't?

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Dear Ginny,

Told you he'd notice. I think you should definitely write back to him and try to start a regular correspondence. If you're still having trouble talking to him in person, then talk to him in your letters,

it will get easier from there.  
Let me know how it turns out, okay?  
Wishing you luck,  
Hermione

\*\*\*

Harry,

Sorry pal, but Dumbledore still hasn't said that you can come and stay. What is it with him? He knows how those idiot Muggles of yours treat you, how could it possibly be better for you to be with them instead of us?

You'll never believe this, but Fred and George bought me a new set of dressrobes! Brand new, top quality and right out of the store! Apparently they've been doing alot of work for their joke shop and decided to get me and Ginny, she also got some, new robes with some of their cash. They said they were plaining on getting me green and lilac ones, but thank Merlin they decided not to!

Y'know, you were right about Hermione and Krum. I wrote her and tried to sound calm and supporting. Not easy, but I think it worked!

Hope you've been reading that book I got you, 'cause the first thing we're doing when I see you again is having a game.

Ron.

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Dear Harry,

I hope you're well and aren't too disappointed that you can't come to the Burrow yet. Mum sent another letter to Dumbledore this morning, so cross your fingers.

You really won't believe this, but Fred and George got Ron and I new dressrobes for this year. Mom's been trying all week to find out where they got the Galleons, but so far the two of them are more secretive than a Slytherin. You wouldn't know anything about where they got the money, do you?

Hermione told me you had warned her about them and she thinks you must know what those jokers are up to.

I'm very glad you liked the gift, I wasn't sure it was something you'd want. So Hagrid sent you a sword? I hope he doesn't expect you to have to use it. Although, considering the creatures he finds for class it'd probably be a good idea to be armed.

Hope to see you soon.

With love,

Ginny

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Dear Hermione,

I may have had a few brief words with Ron about your trip to Bulgaria. Mostly all I did was tell him that it was your decision and that the best thing he could do would be to accept it. After that, the ball's in his court.

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Actually the Dursleys haven't been that bad this year. Well, lately at least. I think I noticed their attitudes improving just after my birthday. And I'm not really grouching about being stuck here, I just wish I had a better explanation than, "it's for your own safety". Besides, even if the Dursleys are being a little nicer, I'm still bored out of my skull sitting around here doing nothing.

As for Gred and Forge, well, that's for me to know and you to find out.

Regards,

Harry

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Ron,

Don't worry too much about me being stuck at the Dursleys. For some reason they've all been acting alot nicer to me than usual, not that that's hard or anything. In any case, life has become a bit more bearable than it usually is during the summers.

Great to hear about the robes the twins got you. You say they also got some for Ginny? That's really nice of them, it's important for her brothers to start realizing that she is not a little girl anymore.

Better polish your chess pieces, if you're brave enough to challenge me to a game, I'm more than willing to accomodate you.

Harry

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Dear Ginny,

Of course I'm disappointed that I can't come to the Burrow yet, but life here with the Dursleys has become a little more tolerable this past week or so. They're hardly in the same league as your family, but they have improved, which isn't saying very much anyway.

I hear from Ron that Fred and George almost got him a set of green and lilac dressrobes. That would have been a sight to see. What about yours? I hope there's a ball this year, so I'll get a chance to see you wearing them, I know you'll look good in whatever colour they chose for you - even green and lilac!

Write back soon, I can use the company.

Harry

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Dear Hermione,

Sweet Merlin, he replied! Harry replied to my letter! And even better, he asked me to write back again! This is so great!

Have you heard anything from Harry? He sounds like he's getting along nicely with those horrid relatives of his. Perhaps he ate something and is hallucinating it all - I just can't imagine them being nice to him after what he's told us all.

And you won't believe this, but... he said he was hoping there was a ball this year so he could see me in my new dressrobes that the twins got me. He also said I'd look good regardless of the colour! This is so great! (I'm repeating myself, I know, but it is!) I just hope to the high heavens he means it and's not just being polite.

Yours thankfully,

Ginny

\*\*\*

Dear Ginny,

Ruskbyte The Order of the Phoenix page 13

That's wonderful news, Gin, I'm really happy for you! It's about time you and Harry got to know each other properly.

I got a letter from Harry a few days ago, he told me as well that the Dursleys have been better than before. Only took them half the summer to get around to it though!

So, the twins got you new dressrobes? Where'd they suddenly get the money from? Last I heard they were flat broke after Ludo Bagman swindled them. You know, I have a strange feeling that Harry probably has something to do with it.

And don't worry, Harry's always polite, unlike Ron, he doesn't know how not to be. But rest assured, he's always sincere about anything that he says. If he says that he knows you'll look great in whatever your brothers got you, he honestly means it.

Y'know, it almost sounds like he's flirting with you.

Best wishes,

Hermione

\*\*\*

Dear Hermione,

Flirting with me? Please don't be joking. You really think so? Oh, what I would give for that to be true. But I really hope I'm not reading too much into this. Literally, since all our conversations have been in letters.

I must admit your theory about Harry knowing what Fred and George are up to sounds more plausible than you could believe. I know he sent them a letter just after his birthday, thanking them for the gift.

Thing is, they were rolling on the floor with laughter after reading it. Something about "Co-Chief Executive Wizard". Any ideas what that's about?

Best wishes,

Ginny

\*\*\*

Harry,

Sorry, but still no word from Dumbledore. Maybe you should talk to Snuffles about it and see if maybe he could suggest that you can come stay with us. I mean, summer'll be over in a couple of weeks, we're running out of time.

You say the Muggles are treating you better? That's weird! And since when did you worry about how us Weasley boys treat Ginny? After all, she is our baby sister.

I hope you're studying that book I gave you, 'cause I'm not going to show any mercy.

Ron.

\*\*\*

Ron,

Unfortunately Snuffles is unavailable at the moment. So unless something happens, I'll only be seeing you at Diagon Alley. Bummer eh?

If you think the Muggles treating me okay is weird, you have no idea. Try living in the same house with them!

And I've been worried about what you guys think of Ginny ever since 2nd year. If we had been paying better attention to her and not just thinking of her as your "baby sister" all the time we might've caught a clue about the trouble she was in. I wouldn't call her a "baby" to her face - she'd probably kill you if you did. If you were lucky.

No mercy? Are you sure? 'Cause you'll be begging me for just that!

Ruskbyte The Order of the Phoenix page 14

Harry

\*\*\*

Dear Harry,

I'm sorry to hear that you won't be joining us until we meet in London. I wish Dumbledore would let you come, with Ron, the Twins and Percy hounding me every moment I could use a level headed person to talk to.

The robes Fred and George got me are cream and silver, which is good since I don't think green and lilac suit me, despite what you said. I'm also hoping there will be a ball this year. If there is one, who would you take? I wonder if Ron'll get it in his head to ask Hermione before the last minute this time. What mischief are you up to with the twins? Hermione and I know you're up to something.

With love,  
Ginny

\*\*\*

Dear Hermione,

I'm beginning to get worried about Harry. I think he has a crush on Ginny I'm serious! He's been going on about how we should've been paying more attention to her and stuff.

This is terrible! I can't have my best friend drooling over my baby sister, especially when she's going to be drooling back!

Love Ron

\*\*\*

Dear Hermione,

You know, I think Ron's a bit over protective about Ginny. All her brother are, but I think he's a bit more so. He also still thinks of her as a baby, which she definitely isn't anymore. From the way she writes I think she's very lonely. Any suggestions?

Less than a week to go until I see you all in Diagon Alley. I can't wait!

Regards,

Harry

\*\*\*

Dear Ginny,

Cream and silver? Nice, I can't wait to see you in them. Who would I take? Why don't we wait until then and find out? After all, we wouldn't want to start tongues wagging now, would we?

Mischief? With Fred and George? Me?

I deny everything.

Love Harry

\*\*\*

Dear Ron,

Get a hold of yourself! If Harry and Ginny start drooling (how could you say something like that about your friend and sister?) on each other it's their business and nobody else's - especially not yours!

Perhaps it's escaped your attention, but Ginny's not a baby anymore and Harry certainly isn't. You really don't have to worry, this is Harry we're talking about. He would never deliberately hurt anyone, especially the people he considers friends and family. Us.

Ruskbyte The Order of the Phoenix page 15

Besides, you don't really know that anything will happen. Maybe you should just sit back and watch what happens before jumping in without checking the water.

Love Hermione

\*\*\*

Dear Harry,

Yes, you're absolutely right. Ron babies Ginny more than I had realized. I think he does it to remind the others that he's not the youngest Weasley. I only hope he realizes how childish that is before he does something to hurt Ginny.

I can't wait either! I'm so excited, have you looked at your book list? Some of what we have to get sounds soooo interesting I can hardly stand the wait.

Best wishes,

Hermione

PS.

I know you're up to something with Fred and George and so does Ginny!

\*\*\*

Hermione,

Omigod, omigod, omigod, omigod! Merlin's beard, Herm! Harry is flirting with me! What's more, he signed his last letter with "Love Harry"!

I don't think I'll be able to stop smiling for the rest of the week. I can't wait to finally see him in London. I think I'm having an attack. Oh boy!

Ginny

PS.

He denies everything when it comes to Fred and George. Circe help us.

\*\*\*

Dear Hermione,

Don't get too excited, it's only a couple more days. And since when have you and Ginny been discussing my dealings with the pranksters supreme? That's assuming, of course, I have any dealings with them.

See you soon,

Harry

\*\*\*

Professor Dumbledore,

I have been thinking a great deal about our conversation at the beginning of the month. Which is why I have a proposition for you...

Ruskbyte The Order of the Phoenix page 16

### 3. Is This Harry?

Sunshine poured from the crystal clear blue skys, embracing Diagon Alley in the warm embrace of

summer as many witches and wizards bustled to and fro. Weaving about the crowds was a tight knot of redheads, two of whom were maintaining a constant exchange that seemed to have no real point beyond annoying the living daylights out of their younger brother.

Ginny Weasley stifled a grin and a giggle as she watched Fred and Georges work on Ron's nerves. The next eldest Weasley was already red in the face with frustration and soon she was willing to bet he would have steam escaping his ears - and not thanks to any Pepperup Potion.

*'He never learns,' she observed, 'and neither do they.'*

Scanning the alley as she and her family strolled along, Ginny flicked her eyes from one passing face to another, hoping to be first to spot Harry. He had long since agreed, in his letters, to meet with them that day, but Ginny couldn't help but worry that something had happened. Too many possibilities presented themselves to her. It could be his horrid relatives, the Dursleys, who had delayed him or stopped him from coming. Maybe the Death Eaters or, worse, You-Know-Who himself had somehow found him and--

She forced herself to stop thinking along those lines. Nothing had happened to Harry. After all, Diagon Alley wasn't exactly tiny now, was it? There was no reason to expect him to show up only minutes after they had flooded here from the Burrow.

"No, I am also-bleeding-lutely not going to try that, thank you!" exclaimed Ron, shoving George away from him and leaning away from the proffered sweet in the older boy's hand.

"Aw, come on, Ronniekins!" protested Fred, on Ron's other side, "It won't hurt you. Much."

*'No, it'll just turn him into a rooster or something equally ridiculous.'*

They had just arrived outside Gringotts, the goblin run wizard bank, where upon their mother, Molly, told them to wait for her to collect the money they would be needing to purchase all the books and equipment they would be needing this year.

Standing just outside, waiting for their mom, Ginny continued her vigil. After a few minutes she noticed several witches standing not too far away, all of them gawking with open mouths and wide eyes at something that was holding their attention as firmly as Veela tended to hold a wizard's.

Curiosity temporarily overwhelming her need to find Harry, she followed their gazes.

*'Wow,' she thought as she caught sight of source of their distraction, 'What a hottie!'*

It was a young wizard, probably just out of school she guessed, standing outside Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions, appraising several male dressrobes displayed in the large front window. He was tall, about the same height as Ron, maybe an inch or so taller, with the broad shoulders of an athlete. His arms were slender, but well defined, his obviously Muggle T-shirt stretched tight across his chest and his tight fitting jeans clearly displayed his lean legs. His robes, apparently made of black leather, were draped casually over his one arm.

His black hair lay in an unruly tussle with several errant locks falling over his forehead in an equally unkempt fringe. He was too far for Ginny to get a good look at his face, but his tanned features were sharp, almost chiseled, and matched his trim figure.

*'Wow,' she repeated to herself, 'I hope Harry grows up to be half that handsome.'*

He turned, his eyes sliding over the alley with clear intent. Suddenly his gaze fell upon Ginny and a broad smile formed. Immediately he started towards her with long, distance eating, strides. Ginny watched as he approached, wondering why he was moving in her direction. She obviously had never seen him before (she would remember if she had), so he couldn't possibly recognize her?

Could he?

Ruskbyte The Order of the Phoenix page 17

As he drew closer Ginny could make out his features more clearly, particularly his eyes which glittered an amazing shade of green. There was something familiar about those eyes, they seemed almost... somehow, as if...

*'Impossible.'*

If he were to put on some round, wire rimmed glasses...

*'Absolutely impossible.'*

His fringe had slid to one side as he finally stood before her. His skin had tanned considerably since Ginny had last seen him, morosely following his uncle out of King's Cross Station, and was a deep golden brown. But now that she recognized him she could see the scar, the scar that made him the most famous young wizard in the world. It was almost invisible against his tanned face and would be very near impossible to spot at a distance.

"Ginny," Harry swept her into a warm embrace, his strong arms hugging her tightly to him.

He pulled back, lifting a hand to tuck an errant lock of fiery red hair behind one of her ears. Smiling happily down at her, his hand gently brushed against her cheek and along her jawline, leaving a burning sensation tingling where his skin met hers.

"It's so good to see you," he told her, in a voice much deeper than the last time she had heard him speak, "You've grown quite a bit. You look beautiful."

Finally Ginny found her voice and spoke the first thing that came to mind.

"Oh, my god!"

\*\*\*

Some movement out the corner of his eye caught Ron's attention. Trying to ignore the pesterings of Fred and George, he turned to see Ginny be caught up in a tight embrace with a tall, dark and handsome stranger. As the man, he looked too old to be called a boy, pulled back slightly to speak with his sister, recognition sank in.

"Oh, my god! Harry?"

The Boy Who Lived turned to face him, a broad grin splitting his face as he took in Ron's purely gobsmacked expression. Reaching out Harry grasped Ron's hand in a firm, bonecrushing actually, handshake.

"Of course not!" he said, releasing his grip, "I'm actually Draco Malfoy in disguise!"

Ron surreptitiously moved his hand behind his back and tried desperately to revive it, trying to conceal the fact that he could barely move his fingers. He could certainly feel them, though he wished he couldn't. Considering the shock that was drowning all other expression from his face, it was easy to hide his discomfort.

*'He'd better watch out when he plays Quidditch, or he'll break the bloody Snitch!'*

"Oh..." gasped Fred from over his shoulder.

"...my..." breathed George from over his other shoulder.

"...god!" the twins chorused, pushing forward to stare openly at Harry.

"Morgana's Bane, Harry, you must've shot up nearly a foot!" exclaimed Ron, looking him up and down with wide eyes. His hand was almost back to normal, so he brought it round front to run it through his hair.

"Ten inches," elaborated Harry calmly.

*'Looks more.'*

Ginny shook her head in disbelief, "You certainly didn't mention *this* in your letters."

Ruskbyte The Order of the Phoenix page 18

Ron shot her a surprised look. Harry and Ginny were exchanging letter? Oh boy. Worst of all was that Harry was just as tall as Ron now and, from the look of things, a good deal stronger. Which left the youngest Weasley brother with no means to intimidate his sister's would-be suitor away from her. Maybe if he could enlist the aid of his brothers, after all six overprotective Weasley men would be far more menacing than just Ron alone, right?

*'Oh, get a grip on yourself, Ron,' he chided, 'This is Harry we're talking about. He wouldn't do anything to hurt Ginny. And remember what Hermione wrote you. Time to stop treating Ginny like a little girl all the time. Besides, if anyone could be a good boyfriend for Ginny, it's Harry.'*

Feeling proud of himself for such mature thoughts Ron returned his attention to the conversation only to lose it a moment later as his mind suddenly backtracked.

*'Boyfriend!?'*

Ron noticed how mature Harry suddenly seemed, had Ron not know Harry was only fifteen he would have guessed him to be around the same age as Percy. His face had lost the soft curves of youth and attained a crisp edge and somewhere along the line Harry's jaw had squared off. Most of all was the absence of his round, wire-rimmed specs, battered and jury-rigged with Sellotape since time immemorial.

Now Harry's startling green eyes viewed the world unobstructed, seeming to blaze with increased furor, freed from the muting effects of the glasses. They were so much lighter and brighter than Ron remembered and were sparkling in a way that reminded him strangely of Dumbledore.

With his rich tan doing a good job of hiding his famous scar from all but close inspection, the only thing about Harry that had not significantly changed was the mop of his messy black hair. It had been trimmed neatly at the back and sides but still refused to be tamed, particularly the longer locks that crowned his head and fell across his forehead.

*'Damn,' Ron realized, 'Girls are going to be tripping over each other to get at him.'*

He frowned.

*'Hermione had better not, or I'll be forced to kill him.'*

"So, Harry, mate," Fred was speaking, "What happened to your glasses?"

"Yeah," picked up George, "Did those Muggle relatives of yours get you, what are they called, compact lenses?"

Harry smiled and shook his head, "Contact lenses," he corrected, "And no, they didn't."

Ron was just as curious about the matter as his brothers and asked, "So what happened then?"

"Corrective surgery," replied Harry, smiling, "Had a bunch of Muggle doctors shooting some laser beams into my eyes for an afternoon."

"Laser beams?" asked George, not understanding the meaning behind the words.

"It's a Muggle thing, silly," explained Ginny, "Don't you *ever* listen to Dad?"

Both twins shook their heads and George replied, "Nope. Why should we? The man's mad."

"He is not!"

"Is too," insisted Fred, "And Mum agrees with us. Heck, Dad's even said so once or twice."

"So, what are laser beams again?" George asked, turning back to Harry.

Harry was chuckling and grinning broadly, "Laser beams. It's an acronym for **L**ight **A**mplification by **S**timulated **E**mission of **R**adiation. Basically it's an invisible ray of light that, if they make it strong enough, can burn through steel."

The four Weasleys stared at Harry in horror for a moment. Finally Ron blurted out, "And you let them use something like that on your eyes? Are you out of your mind!?"

Ruskbyte The Order of the Phoenix page 19

"Slightly," he replied with an impish smile, "I only hear voices when I'm alone."

*'Is that a joke?'*

"Did you hear how he explained that?" asked George of his twin, looking bewildered.

Fred nodded his head, "Indeed I did, dear brother. I just don't believe it."

"Unbelievable, but true I'm afraid."

"It's a sad day for the world," lamented Fred, now shaking his head, "A sad, sad day."

Ginny looked at her brothers with a crooked eyebrow, "What are you two going on about?"

"Harry," they chorused.

"He's turning-"

"-into another-"

"-Hermione!" they chorused again.

"Oi!" exclaimed Ron, looking affronted at the implied slur at his friend, and he wasn't thinking about Harry on this occasion.

"Did someone mention me?" asked a voice to one side.

Everyone turned and found themselves facing a beaming Hermione, who Ron couldn't help but notice had changed nearly as much as Harry. Only better. She had grown a few inches and her figure had filled out a good deal in ways that made Ron want to sweep her off her feet, carry her to a room in the Leaky Cauldron and start doing things that he really shouldn't be thinking about when it came to one of his best friends.

*'It's going to be a long school year. I think I need a shower,'* he thought.

Hermione had finished greeting the twins and Ginny and was now rounding on him. She hugged him tightly and he could clearly feel her suddenly very feminine body pressing against him.

*'Make that a cold shower.'*

He swallowed as she stepped back and grinned up at him.

*'A very cold shower.'*

\*\*\*

Hermione felt a thrill of delight as she took note of Ron's reaction to her embrace. Who knew, maybe he would figure out she liked him and perhaps he would even reciprocate her feelings. She turned to face the one person present, besides herself, that was clearly not a Weasley.

He was tall, just a shade more than Ron, and endowed with a lanky, yet slender figure that held promise of developing into something any reasonable hot-blooded female would consider drop dead gorgeous. His face was definitely handsome enough as is and the way he held himself, his poise, spoke of a good deal of confidence.

*'Y'know,'* she thought, glancing him over, noting his broad chest, *'This guy's really dishy.'*

"I'm Hermione Granger," she said, offering the man her hand.

For a moment she wondered what was up as she noticed the strange looks and grins all four of the Weasleys were giving her. But before she could think about it, the man took Hermione's hand in his own and gave it a firm shake.

"Pleased to meet you," he said charmingly, but with a mischievous smile, "I'm Harry Potter."

It took several moments for her brain to fully register the words as her best friend introduced himself to her for a second time.

*'You've got to be kidding me. It can't be. It's impossible. He isn't...'*

Ruskbyte The Order of the Phoenix page 20

"You may have read about me," he continued, "I've heard I'm in *Modern Magical History*, *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts* and *Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century*."

"Oh, my god!"

*'He is.'*

Hermione felt her eyes widen and her jaw go slack as she stared up at Harry. After a few seconds she pulled herself together and shook her head to clear it. Looking up at him she could see that Harry, and four redheads, were all struggling to restrain their laughter.

"I've just made a complete ass of myself, haven't I?" she asked, feeling her cheeks flush.

"Yep," agreed Ron.

Ginny nodded her head and patted her shoulder sympathetically, "You could say that."

"That-"

"-was"

"-brilliant!" exclaimed Fred and George, exchanging a high five.

Harry smiled at her and shrugged, "Sorry, Herm. You set yourself up for this one."

"I hardly recognised you," Hermione stammered, bringing a hand up to her mouth in amazement at Harry's transformation and some small amount of horror over what had just happened, "You-you've grown. A lot. I could almost say you're... intimidating."

Ron grinned, "Can't wait to see Malfoy's face when he spots you, mate," he told Harry.

Ginny clapped her hands, "Ooo, I wanna be there too!"

"Y'know, Harry," mused Fred, looking Harry over once again, "Usually me and George are the ones that terrorise the first years."

"Now it looks like that's going to be your job," continued George, "And you won't even have to try all that hard."

Fred nodded in agreement and finished, "Heck, you could probably terrorise the rest of the kids, not just the first years."

Hermione puffed up and glared at the two mischief makers, "Don't you two even dare suggest such a thing to Harry!" she berated and then threatened, "If you so much as try, so help me I'll take more points off of Gryffindor than Snape does on a bad day!"

"You're a Prefect?" asked Ginny excitedly. Hermione blushed and gave a slight nod.

"See?" Harry asked the others, "I'm not the only one that left something out of our letters."

Ron suddenly shot forward and enveloped her in a hug, "Mione, why didn't you say something?"

Hermione blushed fiercely and hung her head in embarrassment, "I didn't want anyone to think I was

getting a big head. You know... like--"

"--like Percy?" Fred and George finished for her, grinning maniacally.

"Well, yeah."

"Smooth!" they chimed, each grabbing one of her hands and shaking fiercely, "Finally a Prefect that *doesn't* consider herself above the rest of us mere mortals."

They then, much to Hermione's continued embarrassment, proceeded to make a production of kissing her on both cheeks. Despite her embarrassment she did feel proud and pleased by their reactions and even more pleased at the look of displeasure on Ron's face as the twins smacked their lips with exaggerated sound effects.

After Fred and George were finished Harry pulled her into a hug and gave her a warm kiss on the forehead, much like she had given him at the end of their last year, beaming happily for her.

Ruskbyte The Order of the Phoenix page 21

"You should be proud, Herm," he told her, "I knew you'd be a Prefect."

"You-you did?" she asked in surprise. Hermione had been wracked with worry and doubt right until her Hogwarts letter had been delivered. She had almost been too nervous to open the letter and confirm her fears, but after girding her courage she had done so. After that her parents had to physically pull her off the dining room table, which she was joyfully dancing on top of.

*'That was almost as embarrassing as not recognising Harry.'*

Suddenly she was engulfed in a hug from Ron, who was laughing at her, "Mione," he chided softly,

"We've known you'd be a Prefect from practically the moment we met you on the train."

He gave her a quick peck to the cheek, much to her disappointment, before blushing furiously and leaning in to daringly kiss her on the lips, much to her delight. The moment didn't last long as the twins almost immediately burst into whistles and catcalls, crowing with amusement as the two jumped hastily apart.

"Sod off, you buggers," growled Ron, glaring at them before staring down at his feet to hide his growing blush.

Blushing just as much, Hermione snuck a glance at Harry. He was her and Ron's best friend, part of the Terrible Trio, and she was worried how he would take this development between his closest friends. She needn't have been concerned, however, as she saw he was standing alongside Ginny, a hand on her shoulder, smiling down at her before rolling his eyes and shaking his head.

"Took them long enough," she saw him say to Ginny.

Ginny nodded in agreement, "Think they'll stop fighting now?"

Harry snorted incredulously, "Fighting? Don't you mean flirting? I've been waiting four years to tell them to go and find a room. Now that they've finally figured it out; I can."

"Oh, my god."

The group of children turned, finding Molly Weasley standing on the steps of Gringotts, staring at Harry with wide eyes and a look of utter disbelief.

Hermione saw Harry smirk at Ginny, "I seem to be getting alot of that."

It was good to see her best friend looking so happy, especially after the events of the previous year.

When she had last seen Harry at King's Cross he had been busy withdrawing into a shell of depression. She stood by Ron, who was also looking at Harry and Ginny, shaking his head. He slid an arm around her waist, giving her a smile and a helpless shrug.

*'After all,' she mused as they started walking, 'Who are we to deny Harry any of the happiness that he deserves.'*

\*\*\*

Smiling with contentment, Harry draped an arm over Ron's shoulders and wrapped the other around Ginny's slim waist. Laughing merrily he, Hermione and the five Weasleys began to wind their way through the crowd of witches and wizards bustling about Diagon Alley.

*\*So, Harry...\** whispered a voice in his mind, ***\*When are you going to tell them about us?\****

*'Are you talking about 'us' as in you lot and me together, or 'us' as in just you lot and the fact that you're all suddenly residing inside my head?'* Harry asked wryly.

***\*One or the other,\**** answered the voice.

***\*Or both for that matter,\**** chimed another.

***\*You know you won't be able to hide the changes for very long,\**** mentioned yet one more.

***\*You'll have to tell them something,\**** concluded a fourth.

*'I'm not worried about telling them about the changes.'*

Ruskbyte The Order of the Phoenix page 22

***\*What is it then?\****

*'How in the name of hell can I tell them that I hear voices in my head?'*

***\*Um...\****

*'Especially when the voices are of a bunch of people who have all been dead for millenia.'*

***\*Er...\****

.

.

.

***\*So... when are you going to tell them?\****

*'Damned if I know,'* he replied with a silent sigh, *'Damned if I know.'*

Ruskbyte The Order of the Phoenix page 23

## 4. Reunions and Returns

It was the last night of August, two days after the Weasleys had met up with Harry and Hermione in Diagon Alley and returned with them to the Burrow. Tomorrow was the first of September, when they would be catching the Hogwarts Express on their way back to school for another year.

This last dinner had, as was tradition, been something of a sumptuous feast. For some reason Molly Weasley seemed to forget the amounts of food laden before Hogwarts students in the Great Hall every day at mealtimes.

It had been two strangely satisfying days, Ginny decided, since Harry had come to the Burrow. After dinner that first night the family had gathered in the living room to talk and read, and in Harry and Ron's regard, play the loudly awaited game of wizard chess. Within an hour all talk and attempts to read had ceased and everyone was crowded silently around the two players focused intently on their game and nothing else. After three and a half solid hours, nearly midnight, something happened that Ginny could not remember having ever seen.

Ron lost.

It had been a rough, vicious, game, where both players had been reduced to only a handful of pieces each, ending when it did only because Harry retained his otherworldly calm whilst Ron had gone to new levels of frustration as the hours wore away.

After staring at the board in shock for several minutes Ron had challenged Harry to a rematch, which Harry accepted the following evening. Again the game had lasted several hours, also ending in a close knit battle of only a few remaining pieces, this time in Ron's favour, but barely.

Strangely enough, Ron wasn't angry about Harry's dramatic improvement.

He was delighted.

"Finally," he had grinned after winning their second match, "A worthy opponent."

Harry had snorted, "Took me long enough."

Now, on the eve of their return to Hogwarts, Ginny had wandered outside, trailing after Harry. Both he and Ron had agreed to no match tonight, as they wanted to be well rested for the lengthy journey back to school. After dinner Ginny had spotted Harry quietly exiting through the back door into the garden. Since Ron was busy chatting happily with Hermione, leaving Ginny feeling a little left out, she had followed after him.

*'Who knows?' she wondered wryly, 'Maybe I'll be able to talk to him without blushing.'*

She quickly spotted Harry, in the far corner of the back, sitting upon the small grassy knoll, gazing up at the stars. Quietly, so as not to disturb him, she made her way there, making sure she was obvious in her approach. After the last year it would probably not be a good idea to try sneaking up on him.

Silently Ginny sat herself down beside him, wondering if he had even noticed her when he gave no reaction to her arrival. Suppressing a sigh she sadly mused that Harry hardly ever seemed to notice her, except for the letters over this summer. And his enthusiastic greeting the other day in Diagon Alley.

"Do you believe in true evil?" Harry suddenly asked, surprising her out of her thoughts.

Thinking it over, Ginny realized that she didn't really need to think about it. She already had her answer. She had had her answer for three, nearly four years now.

"Yes," she told him, "I've met him. And so have you."

Harry looked down from the sky and glanced over at her, "In my first year," he started slowly,

"Voldemort told me that there is no such thing as good or evil. That there is only power, and those too weak to seek it. Or use it."

Ruskbyte The Order of the Phoenix page 24

Ginny frowned, "What are you worrying about, Harry?"

He sighed and looked back up at the stars, "I've... got power, Gin," he told her, not seeming to notice her delighted reaction at his calling her 'Gin'.

"Power?"

"Lots of it," he nodded, "But I don't know if I can use it. Or if I should."

He looked over at her again and Ginny could see that he was fighting with himself over something.

"I'm tired of people getting hurt because of me," he explained after a moment, his eyes cast down to the soft grass.

"My parents... Cedric... Sirius..."

"Harry," she started, gently taking his hands in hers, "What happened to your family and Cedric wasn't your fault. And you don't have to worry about Sirius Black."

Strangely enough Harry chuckled, "I'm always worrying about him."

"You shouldn't," she told him, "He couldn't get you two years ago, after he escaped, and nobody saw hide nor hair of him last year. Now that You-Kno-- Voldemort is back, he's going to be too busy kissing his master's feet to be bothered with you."

Harry looked at her with a puzzled expression that quickly changed into one of amusement as he shook his head and chuckled once again, "I'm not worried about Sirius trying to kill me, Gin," he said, "I'm more worried about him getting himself killed, or worse, caught again."

Now it was Ginny that looked puzzled, "Excuse me?"

"Don't worry, Gin," he said, squeezing her hands, "My godfather won't hurt me."

"Godfather," her eyes grew wide as she gaped at him in shock, "Sirius Black is your *godfather*?"

Harry nodded sadly, "Yeah. He and my dad, and Professor Lupin -remember him?- were best friends when they were at Hogwarts. Along with another... man," His lips curled in distaste, something Ginny had only ever seen from Harry with regards Draco Malfoy, "Peter Pettigrew. The four were practically inseparable. Called themselves the Marauders."

"Pettigrew?" Ginny repeated, "But, wasn't he the one Black killed? Along with those Muggles?"

"So everyone thinks," grimaced Harry, "Unfortunately the bastard's still alive."

Ginny shook her head in confusion. Harry had just said Pettigrew was one of his father's best friends, yet here he was cursing that he wasn't dead. Very strange, especially when Pettigrew was supposedly fourteen years dead and buried.

"I don't understand."

Harry looked up at her and Ginny could see him thinking, weighing his options, deciding if he could trust her enough to tell her something. Something very secret and very important.

*'Please, Harry,' she begged, 'You can trust me, I know you can.'*

"Have you ever trusted someone, Gin?" he finally asked, "Completely, utterly, with your life?"

Ginny met his gaze and nodded. She wondered if he would ever know that he had just described how she felt about him. With a sigh Harry averted his gaze and began considering the night sky.

"My dad also did. He had three friends that he felt he could trust, not only with his life, but with his wife's and mine."

Another sigh.

"He was wrong."

"Black?" Ginny asked, gently prodding him to continue.

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Harry shook his head and turned to look at her again, "Imagine the situation, Gin. Voldemort is coming after you and your son. There doesn't seem to be any hope of stopping him, so your only chance of survival is to run and hide. You have to choose someone you trust absolutely to guard and keep the secret of your location..."

Ginny waited patiently as he paused, considering what to say next, *'What is it you know, Harry? What do you know that I, and the rest of us, don't?'*

"Your one friend is sound minded," he continued after a while, "He's deaver, loyal, dependable and would certainly be an almost perfect choice. Only one problem... he's a werewolf. You know about this, since your first year of school actually, and you still trust him, but... Voldemort has been recruiting werewolves and vampires and other creatures of the night. Despite everything, despite what you know about his character... there's the smallest doubt in your mind."

It wasn't difficult to put two and two together, "Professor Lupin," Ginny concluded.

"Yes," Harry nodded his confirmation before starting up again, "Then there's your other friend. He's quiet, unassuming, shy, bashful, not really that good at magic, practically a squib, and absolutely hopeless when it comes to fighting. And besides that, if it weren't for the fact the Sorting Hat had put him in Gryffindor, you would think he was really a coward."

"Pettigrew?" she asked, wondering where this was leading.

Again Harry nodded, "And then there's your closest friend. Out of the three, he's the one you trust more than anything or anyone, even Dumbledore. He's trustworthy and loyal to the death, a bit of a joker and a ladies man, but still a brilliant student, even if he doesn't really study. Everyone knows he's your friend, best man at your wedding, your son's godfather. A man everyone knows you trust with your life. And your son's."

*'In other words, Sirius Black.'*

He looked at her sharply and asked, "Which one?"

"Excuse me?" Ginny was really confused now, unsure of what he was asking of her.

"Which one would you choose to guard your secret?"

"Oh, well..." she shrugged helplessly, "Black, I guess. Out of the three..."

Harry nodded, "Exactly. That's who I would choose. That's who anyone in the same position would choose. That's who everyone thought my parents would choose."

He paused and smiled sadly, "That's exactly who they did *not* choose."

*'What?'*

"What?"

Again Harry looked at her, a considering look, an appraising look.

"You *can* trust me, Harry," Ginny whispered, dropping her gaze to her hands in her lap.

"I know, Gin," he replied, gently cupping her jaw and raising her face back up to look into his own startling green eyes.

"It's a long and complicated story, Gin. And I want you to hear it."

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It had been a long night, Harry mused, but strangely satisfying. After explaining the convoluted circumstances surrounding Sirius' imprisonment, he and Ginny had talked about some of the other 'little adventures' Harry and his two comrades had shared. It had been very late in the night, almost midnight, before the two youngsters had retired back into the Burrow.

*'All-in-all, a satisfying night,'* concluded Harry as he, along with the Weasleys and Hermione made there way through King's Cross Station.

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***\*Don't you mean a frustrating night?\**** asked a familiar voice.

Harry frowned mentally, *'What do you mean?'*

***\*She's a hottie.\****

Harry glanced at Ginny, pushing her cart alongside Ron, just ahead of Harry and Hermione.

***\*Damn, look at that ass!\****

*'Hey!'*

***\*Well, look at it.\****

*'I am, though I'm not sure you should be,'* Harry had to admit, Ginny had somehow turned into a very beautiful girl and her posterior was quite eye catching.

***\*What d'you mean by that?\****

*'You're older than her. Much older.'*

***\*Happened all the time in my day.\****

*'You've been dead since before they built the pyramids.'*

***\*A small inconvenience\****

*'You're married, Osiris,'* sighed Harry in exasperation.

The voice chuckled, ***\*So? What's wrong with a little window shopping?\****

Harry smirked, *'You realize what Isis will do to you if she finds you checking out Ginny's ass? Besides, despite however nice the view may be, she's my friend. I like her,'*

***\*I s'pose you're right, Harry. I'm just amazed you didn't need a cold shower last night.\****

*'You're not the only one,'* he sighed, unaware that his eyes were still tracking Ginny's swaying rear and that he had also been noticed by Hermione, who was trying not to grin.

A minute or so later the group had passed through the barrier between platforms nine and ten and were standing before the Hogwarts Express. Harry adjusted his father's, now his, trenchrobe and smiled at the thrill of knowing he would soon be back at Hogwarts.

It didn't take long for Harry to start drawing attention to himself, even when he wasn't trying, as the group made their way towards what was now their customary carriage. As they passed other students and acquaintances almost all of them looked at Harry with a blank curiosity that soon changed to amazed disbelief. Some of the doubletakes were so exaggerated they led to a series of rather amusing prat falls which left the twins in stitches, especially when Neville had tripped over his trunk, collided with his stern grandmother and toppled both of them to the floor in a tangle of limbs and shouts.

***\*Is he usually like that?\****

*'I'm afraid so.'*

But most uncomfortable for Harry were the decidedly salacious gazes he found himself receiving from the female portion of those they met. It reminded him a great deal of how the girls had fallen about Viktor Krum and... Cedric, he winced at the name, during the tournament the previous year and immediately preceding the Yule Ball. If this was how it always felt, he wondered, then he was glad they ignored him back then.

***\*And you wish they'd continue ignoring you?\****

*'Damn straight.'*

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He was, however, please to note that both Ginny and Hermione were scowling at the other girls' reactions and in some cases shooting death glares that would land both of them in Azkaban should looks ever be able to kill. He found this rather amusing in Hermione's case, but touching in how she was so protective of her friend. When it came to Ginny, though, he was both delighted and also distressed by her reaction. He didn't want her worrying about someone stealing him away...

*'Steal me? When did this happen?'*

They had reached their carriage and were shoving their trunks inside when they were interrupted by a familiar drawl, "Well, well. If it isn't the famous Scarhead, the Mudblood and the beggar Weasel family."

***\*Who is that?\****

***\*That should be obvious, he's an asshole.\****

***\*Fine. Then what's the asshole's name?\****

"Malfoy," stated Harry, replying to both the voices in his mind and the stuck up Slytherin that had just materialized in their way. He turned slowly around, giving the now much smaller boy a chance to get a good look at the changes he had undertaken over the last month. He almost smiled with smug satisfaction as he saw Malfoy's eyes widen in surprise and bewilderment for a moment before flickering behind their usual cold mask of indifference.

***\*Hit the snotty bugger!\**** urged one voice.

*'Pleasant idea, Heracles, but inappropriate.'*

"I must say, I'm surprised," Harry stated, noticing that Hermione was holding back Ron, who was glowering dangerously, and Ginny was keeping an eye on the twins, both of which were scowling in a similar fashion. "I didn't think you'd have the guts, Malfoy, to show your ferret face without your lumbering bodyguards to protect you."

Malfoy's lips curled into a sneer and he spoke, "Get--" as the word formed in his mouth, Harry started up a conversation with his 'ghosts'.

*'Suggestions?'* he asked his companions.

***\*A few,\**** came an instant reply.

"--him!" finished Malfoy, his superior bearing now insufferably smug, but Harry was already in motion before the short command was finished.

He had observed Malfoy's thugs, er, companions, Crabbe and Goyle coming up behind him from their reflections in the train carriage windows. Fortunately for Harry the pair's primary strength was also the cause of their primary weakness. The lumbering Slytherins were the largest and strongest fifth years at Hogwarts, but their sheer size and bulk hindered their movements, reducing their speed and reflexes in equal proportion.

Harry had began to counter-attack before they had even started to move against him.

With help from the multitude of voices in his head, not to mention his own considerable mental faculties, Harry had devised over a dozen different means of dealing with the pair of Slytherins

sneaking behind him.

As it turned out, he only need the first one.

Neither of the two had time to move against him, nor did any of his friends have time to shout out a warning. Harry stepped to one side and then quickly V-stepped, reaching out and placing a hand on Goyle's chest and giving a small push. As he pushed the bulky Slytherin he cast a quick wandless Banishing Charm, resulting in the other boy crashing over as though hit head on by a speeding freight train. Goyle toppled into Crabbe beside him and the pair fell to the floor of the platform with a thunderous crash that Harry could feel though his sneakers.

*\*Nicely done,\** complimented one of the many voices.

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*'Thanks,'* he replied. *'This is almost too easy.'*

Crabbe shoved Goyle off of him and stumbled to his feet, face red and twisted with anger.

"You idiots! Get him!" roared Malfoy, glaring at his companions and Harry.

"Please, Malfoy, don't make me laugh," Harry drawled, sounding utterly bored with the situation.

"These two oafs of yours won't be able to lay a finger on me. I can see their movements as they form, predict their intended actions and respond accordingly, before they even begin to fight."

Crabbe started to take a step forward, hands clenching in anticipation of closing around Harry's neck.

His foot had only just lifted off the ground when he felt the tip of Harry's wand pressing gently against his forehead, right between his eyes. Neither he, nor any of those watching, had seen Harry move; he had drawn his wand that fast.

"If you so much as twitch the wrong way," stated Harry, his voice colder than ice, "You will find yourself waking up in the Hospital Wing."

Still on the floor, behind Crabbe, Goyle started quietly shifting about, but received a warning from Harry before he had moved an inch, even though Harry's eyes never once strayed from watching Crabbe. "Breathe too hard, Goyle, and you'll be joining him."

Still keeping his eyes trained on the frozen Crabbe, Harry backed up a couple of steps, his wand not wavering a millimetre.

"Now, back off. Behind Malfoy, both of you," he ordered.

"I must say, I'm surprised, Potter," said Malfoy, throwing Harry's earlier words in his face, "Even if you have finally outgrown the lost-baby-boy look, you shouldn't be harrassing other students, particularly Slytherins, in front of a Prefect." His hand reached into a pocket and withdrew a shining silver badge.

Before Harry or the Weasley's could respond, Hermione stepped forward, beside Harry, "Then it's a good thing that Gryffindor Prefects have the right to supercede when it comes to students from their own house." Her badge was pinned to her shirt and sparkled in the sunlight.

"Well, it seems we have an impasse," observed Malfoy with a sneer, "Better be careful, Potter. The Mudblood won't be able to stay with you all the time. Sooner or later you won't have her Prefect badge to hide behind."

Harry placed a calming hand on Hermione's shoulder, gently restraining her as he smirked towards Malfoy, "Guess that means I'll have to hide behind *my own* then," he said.

After a moment the words sank in and everyone gaped at him, chorusing, "What?"

Harry pulled aside the lapel of his trenchrobe, revealing his gleaming Prefect badge pinned securely to the inside right pocket. He smiled at Malfoy, who had gone so red in the face he looked like a dumbstruck tomato.

"Just because I don't flaunt it," he purred, "Doesn't mean I don't have it."

*\*Subtle, Harry, subtle.\**

*'Thanks, I certainly didn't learn it from you.'*

*\*Hey!\**

Malfoy continued to gape for nearly a full minute, his mouth moving but not producing any sound. He looked very much like a landed carp that had yet to realize it was caught. Finally he drew himself up, trying to look disdainful but failing, and hurried inside the train, followed by a subdued and worried looking Crabbe and Goyle.

Harry burst into laughter, especially when he noticed his friends were reacting in much the same manner. He looked at them mischievously, "Guess I forgot to mention this as well, huh?"

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After the incident at the platform the train ride to Hogwarts had been almost painfully dull. Ron could not remember a time when more people had stopped by their compartment, all of them there to see the 'new and improved' Harry, who had, single handedly, beat Crabbe and Goyle into bloody pulps and with scathing wit insulted Malfoy's honor.

*'I never knew things could blow so out of proportion,'* he thought as he, his friends and family sat at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall, having just finished watching the yearly Sorting.

After a few initial statements, capped by Dumbledore's introduction of Professor Lupin's return as the school's Defence Against the Dark Arts instructor - which earned loud cheers of approval from the students, except, of course, the Slytherins - and then the feast began.

The students had ravenously devoured the heaps of food which sprung up before them, as it always did. Ron had been surprised at the volume Harry alone had consumed, almost equal to what Ron himself ate on a hungry day. Now, Dumbledore had called for silence and was giving them the final few notices before they would be leaving for their dorm in Gryffindor Tower.

After the customary warnings against straying into the dark forest and listing whatever new items

Filch decided should now be banned from use in the corridors. Then he said something that caused a stir amongst the older students.

"I am also pleased to announce that, after considering its great success last year, it has been decided that Hogwarts shall once again be hosting a Yule Ball this christmas eve."

A good number of boys groaned, sinking their heads into their hands. Not another one, they were all thinking. Asking a girl to go to the ball with them was a tortuous experience. Naturally all the ladies in question were delighted, even Hermione and especially Ginny for some reason.

"As with last year," Dumbledore explained, "the ball is only open to fourth-years and above. Younger students are welcome to attend if invited."

'Well,' Ron thought with a smirk, 'At least I already know who I'm going with.' He shot what he hoped was a surreptitious glance at Hermione, sitting across from him. Unfortunately she happened to be staring right at him at just that moment, causing both of them to blush and look away.

At the same time he noticed Harry and Ginny exchanging a similar look, only neither of them reacted in quite the way he had come to expect. His sister brought a hand to her smiling lips and tried, unsuccessfully, to stifle a giggle while Harry merely arched an eyebrow and... smirked?

'Sweet Merlin, they're flirting!'

"Finally," he continued, "It is with great pleasure that I can announce a new, extra-curricula, subject now being offered here at Hogwarts."

Everybody exchanged puzzled glances, nothing had been said about this in their letters or any of their other notifications. For that matter, Ron noticed, even the other professors seemed surprised by this announcement.

'Didn't they know?' he thought, 'Wonder why?'

"Practical Fighting Techniques, as the subject has been named," explained Dumbledore, "can only be taken by fourth-year students and above. It is being held in a newly constructed auditorium at the end of the third floor corridor. Classes will take place after dinner each week day, from seven until nine o'clock."

"The third floor! That's where they hid the Philosopher's stone!" whispered Hermione excitedly.

"Fighting?" muttered Seamus, "Isn't that what DADA is?"

Ron shrugged, "Sounds more hands on to me. Kinda like a dueling club."

'Merlin help us if that's the case.'

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The whispers and murmurs filling the Great Hall silenced as Dumbledore held up a hand and then continued to speak, "It is, as I said, an elective subject, however all students are required to attend the first lesson. I am given to understand, by the instructor, that this shall only be a demonstration, whereupon students will be able to consider further attendance."

"Who's teaching it?" called out Fred.

'Knowing our luck, probably Snape,' thought Ron.

Dumbledore smiled and shook his head, "That you shall only find out tomorrow, Mr Weasley. Now, however, I think that it is time for bed. Prefects, kindly lead your houses to their dormitories. Good night."

As the students began to rise up and Hermione starting yelling for the first years to follow her and Harry to the common room, Ron looked at his friend, "So... Practical Fighting Techniques," he said,

"What do think it will be like?"

Harry smiled mysteriously, "It'll certainly be interesting."

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## 5. We're Back!

It was the first proper day of school, September second, and Ginny had just seated herself for breakfast at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall. Across from her sat Ron and Hermione, having an argument as usual, although Ginny couldn't figure out what exactly they were fighting about. Harry was sitting across from them, which meant he was also sitting next to her, causing Ginny to be extra careful with regards the butter dish.

"They've been at it half an hour already," he whispered, leaning close to her.

Ginny tried not to blush at his closeness and softly replied, "Perhaps you should tell them to get a room, like you wanted to."

Harry shook his head and grinned, "I'm waiting for more people to arrive."

Their first night back had seen the Gryffindor common room a hive of activity as Harry fielded a barrage of questions from the first-years and one or two older students, always with a look of long suffering patience and resignation on his face. It seemed that Harry was of even greater interest now that he was a Prefect. The rest of the house had been engaged in talks about this new subject that was being offered.

Even Professor Lupin, who stopped by to exchange greetings with Harry, Ron and Hermione, could tell them nothing about it. Apparently the news was as much of a surprise to the teachers as it had been to the students, Dumbledore refused to tell them anything other than that he thought they would find the first night's demonstration, "Interesting."

"Oi, 'Arry," mumbled Ron around a mouthful of sausage, "Wah'junk d'you think ol' Trelawney will be predicting this year for ya?"

"Honestly, you two," muttered Hermione, her well known dislike of Divination and Trelawney very evident in her posture.

Harry took a bite from the bagel he was holding and shrugged, "I dunno and I really don't give a royal

damn. 'Specially after I dropped the subject."

"You're dropping Divination!?" exclaimed Ron, his eyes almost popping out of his head as he gaped across at his friend, "Wha- how- whe- who- why?"

For a moment Harry's eyes were hooded in shadow before he smiled thinly, "Circumstances."

You did not have to take Divination, which Ginny fortunately did not, to be able to figure out the meaning in Harry's reply. After all, with Voldemort's return last year, wasting time with a pointless subject like Divination was no longer an option, or luxury, that Harry could afford.

"So what will you be doing instead?" asked Hermione excitedly, almost bouncing in her seat.

"Practicing," this time Harry's smile was filled with humour and mystery.

Ginny considered, *'Practicing what? DADA? No, he would've just said so. Must be something else, but what? Quidditch?'* she shook her head, *'Don't be ridiculous.'*

At this point a couple of sixth-years came hurrying past, handing out their class timetables. Harry took his and tucked it in a pocket, not even bothering to look it over. Ron, Hermione and Ginny, however, began reading.

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me," groaned Ron, dropping his head on the table with a thud.

"What?"

"Potions. First lesson of the day," he mumbled.

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Even Hermione looked depressed to hear this, although Ginny noticed that all Harry did was smirk knowingly and continue munching on his bagel. Decidedly odd, considering how much Snape despised him and tormented him during class. She read her own schedule and smiled across at her brother in sympathy, "If it makes you feel any better, I'm right after you."

Ron groaned again, head still on the tabletop, "What a spiffing way to start off the year."

*'I dunno,'* she thought, *'Harry seems to be enjoying himself.'*

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Snape strode meaningfully into his classroom, black robes billowing behind him. Not even waiting to see if all the students had arrived he began speaking, "You were given three essays to write over the summer. I expect them to be placed on my desk at the end of this period, though I doubt I will find many that are worthy of my attention."

He looked meaningfully at Harry as he said this, the implied slur seeming to have no effect at all on the Gryffindor boy who was almost lounging behind his workbench, alongside his constant companion, and fellow troublemaker, Ron. In fact, much to Snape's surprise, it was Ron that was affronted by the Potion Master's remark, while Harry merely looked exceedingly bored.

*'Something is different about that boy,'* observed Snape.

It wasn't the remarkable physical change that had somehow turned Harry from a diminutive little boy into a fair sized and well toned young man. No, it was something else. His posture spoke of great amounts of self-confidence and every languid movement was smooth and fluid. The greatest change, however, was Harry's face. It was implacable, as if he had seen everything there was to see and nothing could surprise him any longer. Or frighten him.

*'Probably true,'* he mused, but decided, *'Time to put him in his place before his head swells any more than it already has.'*

"There are five potions that can be used to counteract the effects of Sphinx venom. Only four are still brewed in modern times," he snapped, striding down the centre aisle of the room, "One you are to learn next year, but the other three are mentioned in this year's textbook."

Snape reached where Harry and Ron were sitting and gave them an evil smirk, he knew there was no possible way either of them could know what he planned to ask of them. "Mr Potter," he said, "choose one and explain how to brew it."

Harry looked up at him and blinked owlishly, not even bothering to straighten up in his seat as he smiled and began speaking.

"Fill a cauldron with 450ml of water, start to boil. When the water is just beginning to bubble, set it down to a simmer. Add 15g of finely chopped Executioner's Hood, followed by 10g of Oak and 20g of Redwood sawdust, mixed evenly. Stir counter-clockwise for five minutes, then let it sit for thirty three minutes."

He paused to glance around the class, smiling impishly at Malfoy before returning his gaze to Snape, who was frowning in deep thought.

*'I know this potion from somewhere, but it couldn't be...'*

"Now add 13g of a Dragon Heartstring that has been lightly dusted with Powdered Daemon Bone. Pour in 50ml of chilled Vampire Blood, which must be between 5 and 10 degrees Celsius. Stir the mixture clockwise for three minutes and then counter-clockwise for a further three, making sure to use a silver ladle. Allow the potion to sit for between eight to ten minutes, until it achieves a violet color and a viscosity approximately five times that of water," he droned in a bored monotone, as though this took no thought at all.

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"Now introduce 4g of Volcanic Ash which must be added whilst stirring the potion clockwise with a blue tipped Pegasus Feather. Allow the potion to rest for one hour and six minutes, at which point it will turn liquid bronze in appearance. The maximum safe dosage for an adult human is a hundred and four milliliters and is best taken on a full stomach. The potion can stand for eight months before becoming unusable, which will be indicated by it changing black in colour."

After he finished his recitation Harry leaned forward and casually propped himself up on the counter

with an elbow, looking languidly up at Snape.

"Anything else?"

Snape looked at Harry with his eyes as round and wide as dinner plates. He seemed to snap out of it after a minute or so, striding to one of the dungeons' bookshelves. He ran a hurried hand over several spines before pulling an ancient looking tome free, ignoring the four or five books that toppled from the shelf in his hurry.

*'Impossible,'* he was thinking.

Turning around he slammed the massive tome down on the nearest work bench, almost crushing Pansy Parkinson's hand. He quickly flipped to the middle of the book and began paging through it in obvious agitation before settling on one page which he ran a boney finger down as he murmured the words to himself. Finally he looked up to stare across the room at Harry, an expression of complete and utter disbelief on his sallow face.

"How in Salazar Slytherin's name do you know about this potion, Potter?" he asked, his voice a hollow echo, devoid of its usual biting sharpness.

Harry shrugged and made a vague motion with one hand, "Read about it somewhere."

Snape stared at Harry for a long moment before rounding the desk and slowly making his way towards the waiting student, aware that the rest of the class were watching them both closely. "Nobody, to my knowledge," he stated, "has even so much as attempted to brew this since before Hogwarts was founded."

Standing before Harry once again he frowned down at the boy in complete incomprehension as to how a mere fifth-year, and a Gryffindor at that, could know this, "And that tome there," Snape motioned at the book on the work table, "Is one of the only four written copies known to exist."

Harry looked around him at the class, all of whom were gaping at him in a way disconcertingly similar to Snape. He shrugged apologetically, "I had a productive summer."

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"Dementors."

Remus Lupin smiled as he looked over his class of fifth year Gryffindors, all of whom sat in their seats, watching him with rapt gazes, particularly Harry.

"I see I got your attention," he observed.

Lupin paced about his classroom, hands behind his back, as he gave the students a brief lecture and overview of Dementors, their murky origins and, worse yet, their capabilities. After a few short minutes he had almost finished what he had too say.

"...which leads us to the only known charm that can drive off or, if cast by a sufficiently strong wizard, destroy a Dementor. It is called the Patronus Charm."

Standing behind his desk, Lupin glanced over at Harry. The boy had grown a good deal since Remus had seen him last, at the end of Harry's third year. He was now nearly as tall as his father had been and with the same slender, yet muscular, physique. Lupin had been very much surprised at the feast the previous night. When he had finally spotted Harry in the crowd of students at the Gryffindor table he had rubbed his eyes and double checked to make sure he wasn't hallucinating.

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It was truly a remarkable transformation from boy to man, Lupin had thought, leading him to wonder what Sirius would make of it when next he managed to see Harry. From what Lupin had been told, the last time Sirius had seen the boy, Harry had been in a terrible state. It was good to see that he had managed to shrug it off, but now it was time to continue with the lesson.

*'I know he hates having the limelight, but maybe...'*

Lupin turned to look at Harry, "Harry, if you would?"

"Professor?"

"I know you can produce a spectacular Patronus," explained Lupin, "I was hoping that you could demonstrate for the class."

Harry nodded and rose from his seat, moving to the front of the class. Holding his wand loosely in his hand, he looked at Lupin and asked, "Any target?"

Lupin smiled and shook his head, waving a hand vaguely as he did so, "The far wall will be fine, Harry. Without a Dementor to attack, the Patronus will merely wander about for a minute or so."

Harry nodded once again and aimed his wand in roughly the general direction of the far side of the classroom, still holding it loosely. He appeared so casual in his approach Lupin momentarily wondered if Harry was concentrating hard enough to actually form a Patronus.

"Expecto Patronum!" the boy snapped, his eyes suddenly burning bright and his body shifting into a well-balanced stance, ready for combat.

Nobody in the classroom could have been more surprised by what happened next than Lupin, except perhaps Ron and Hermione, both of whom had also witnessed Harry's Patronus on the odd occasion. They knew that the principle characteristic of a Patronus charm was that the animal, or object, produced was a gleaming, brilliant silver in colour. What emerged from Harry's wand was neither silver, nor was it the solitary stag they had come to expect.

There was an ethereal stag, true, but it clearly had company.

The magnificent animal burst from Harry's wand directly before him, landing on the classroom floor in absolute silence. To its immediate right was a large, silently snarling and snapping wolf which began to prowl about. It was a good deal larger than most wolves because, as three of those present knew, it was not really a wolf. It was a werewolf. To the stag's left was another large and unique creature. It was a giant dog, almost equaling the werewolf in size, which had also begun to stalk the classroom, its

massive head scanning left and right as it moved.

The most startling thing about this was not that Harry had produced three Patronus' instead of just one, an unprecedented feat in of itself, but the fact that the three guardians were not silver in appearance. They were gold.

It was a deep and rich gold that gleamed and shone with the brightness of the sun, bathing the classroom in a warm yellow glow. All three Patronus' were shimmering and glowing like molten ore fresh from the furnace and only just poured into the appropriate casts.

Amidst the gasps of awe and amazement, not to mention his own shock, Lupin was vaguely aware of hearing a soft whisper coming from Hermione, just behind him.

"Moony, Padfoot and Prongs."

His own thoughts were running on similar lines, but it wasn't until he heard the girl speak the old nicknames, did Lupin finally comprehend what he was seeing.

'Sweet Merlin,' he thought, *'It **is** the three of us. We're Harry's Patronus.'*

A moment later, as the three Patronus' continued to shift and patrol restless about the room a grin of mixed mischief and delight crossed his normally tired face, *'Wait until Sirius hears about this.'*

A moment after that another thought occurred to him, *'Bugger Sirius, wait until Albus hears!'*

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"Seamus was able to get a few sparks and Hermione managed a little mist," enthused Neville that evening at dinner, "But nothing like Harry's!"

"It takes some practice," downplayed Harry, not enjoying the attention being piled upon him by the other Gryffindors. Almost everyone had heard about his rather spectacular Patronus during DADA, including the other houses. "It took me almost a year before I got it right."

Dean Thomas shook his head, "More that 'right' I'd say."

Ron nodded his agreement, "Yeah. Have you been practicing without telling us?"

"When have I had the time?" asked Harry, wishing Professor Lupin had not called him up before his classmates. If anything, he did not need more attention coming his way.

*'I'll be getting more than enough as it is after tonight,'* he thought darkly.

***\*Then you shouldn't have made that proposition to Dumbledore,\**** chided an amused voice.

Harry sighed, *'Tell me about it.'*

"Enough about Harry's Patronus," interrupted Ginny, seeming to understand his discomfort, "We've got the new class in fifteen minutes. We should get going."

"Yeah," agreed Fred, rising from his seat, "Can't wait to see what it's all about."

"Or who the teacher is," admitted George, also standing up.

Harry rose from his seat, throwing Ginny a grateful look for changing the subject, causing her to blush and duck her head down. It was good to have the attention diverted away from him, if only for a few minutes. Ron, Hermione and the other students crowded around him got up as well and the group made their way out the Great Hall.

"With our luck," voiced Ron, "it's probably Snape."

"Could be worse," declared Seamus, "Could be Lockhart."

Beside them, Lavender and Parvati giggled, "That would be nice," said Lavender, "At least he was good looking and didn't give us too much difficult homework."

All the guys, including Ginny and Hermione, rolled their eyes or shook their heads.

*'Some things never change,'* observed Harry, *'No matter how much they should.'*

***\*That's women for you.\****

***\*Hey! Watch your mouth, Loki!\****

***\*Oops.\****

As the Gryffindors passed the staff table, Harry spotted Dumbledore waiting by the entrance to the anteroom that he and the other Triwizard champions had been led into the previous year. With a nod he indicated for him to come over. Harry nodded his understanding.

"I'll see you all in a few minutes," he said to his friends as he stopped walking, "I need to speak to Dumbledore first."

"D'you want us to come with you?" asked Hermione, immediately concerned.

Harry shook his head, "Don't bother yourselves. I only want to ask him a question or two about the class before it starts. You three go on ahead."

"We'll save you a seat," promised Ginny as the trio moved to follow the rest of the student.

"Nervous, Harry?" Dumbledore asked as Harry approached him, blue eyes sparkling.

"A little," Harry admitted, licking his lips.

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The old wizard smiled, "If you think it will help, try picturing everyone sitting in front of you wearing nothing but their underwear. You'd be surprised how well it works."

Harry's mind immediately strayed to Ginny and the thought of her being in the same room as him wearing nothing but her...

"Bad idea," he stated, snapping back to the present, praying that he wasn't blushing and knowing that he was failing miserably. At least Dumbledore hadn't suggested he picture the audience with no clothes on... he felt himself flush an even brighter red.

Dumbledore said nothing, but his paternal smile said everything. After a few minutes, once the Great Hall was empty, he and Harry made their way to the third floor. There, in the room that had once been home to a giant three-headed dog, they descended a large spiral staircase. This Harry thought was a great improvement on the trapdoor than had originally been there. When they reached the bottom of

the stairs Dumbledore led Harry through a set of large wooden doors, entering the newly constructed classroom.

It was designed along the lines of a large amphitheatre, easily capable of seating the entire student population of Hogwarts. The benches and seats behind them radiated outwards from a large sunken platform that was about a hundred and twenty feet across, with a small raised podium in the centre. Followed Dumbledore down the steps of the centre aisle to the stage, Harry spotted Ron, Hermione and Ginny, along with the rest of the Gryffindor crowd, sitting towards the front. He smiled as he saw the empty seat between Ginny and Hermione that had been saved for him. Reaching the stage he gave his friends an apologetic shrug as he moved to stand behind the headmaster, who stood at the podium in order to address those assembled.

"Good evening all," Dumbledore began, smiling benevolently at the assembled students and many scattered teachers. "I trust you had a fulfilling dinner? Very good."

Harry shifted from one foot to the other, having never felt so nervous in his life, not even the morning of the first task, when he had found himself going up against a full-grown dragon.

*'I'm doomed.'*

***\*With us helping you? Probably.\****

"You should all be aware that last year, during the conclusion of the Triwizard tournament, Lord Voldemort," Dumbledore continued speaking, ignoring the flinches and gasps that issued at the mention of the dark lord's name, "was successful in resurrecting for himself a physical body and regaining his powers. Because of this event and the tragic circumstances that surround it, I and a colleague of mine, have decided to give the students here at Hogwarts specialized training that will, hopefully, prove useful to you in the days of darkness that lie ahead of us."

***\*A trifle melodramatic, isn't he?\****

*'He's Dumbledore, Isis,' replied Harry, 'He's always been like this.'*

***\*Is he mad?\****

*'Who isn't?'*

"This training, I have been told, will be rigorous and demanding to a degree that will no doubt dishearten a great many of you. I must therefore stress to you that despite the hardship, it is imperative that you display the utmost commitment to achieving the goals set before you by your instructor," said Dumbledore, his eyes scanning the students seated around the room.

*'I've survived a duel with Voldemort,' Harry told himself, 'How hard can this be?'*

***\*You really want to know?\****

"And now, it is with great pleasure," concluded the headmaster, "that I present you with the newest addition to Hogwarts' teaching body. The young man who conceived, designed and will soon be instructing you in this course concerning the art of magical combat."

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Finished, Dumbledore nodded his head and gave a short bow before stepping around the podium and making his way to the elevated seat that had been set aside for him at the very front and centre of the auditorium. Harry's swallowed nervously and surreptitiously rubbed his suddenly sweaty palms against his robes. It was his turn now.

*'Well,' he took a deep breath, 'Here it goes.'*

***\*This is going to be fun.\****

*'Oh, be quiet.'*

Taking another deep breath Harry stepped forward and took his place behind the podium Dumbledore had just vacated. Ignoring the tumultuous squirming of his stomach, he stared up at the roomful of students and teachers, each and every one of them focused solely on him standing there.

"Good evening," he greeted them, "Welcome to Practical Fighting Techniques."

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## 6. Practical Fighting Techniques

'Why am I not surprised that they're acting this way?' Harry wondered.

***\*Well, you did drop something of a bombshell on them.\****

*'Guess so.'*

All told the Practical Fighting Techniques auditorium was in the throes of loudly declared shock, disbelief, outrage and pretty much everything else. Half the students were staring at Harry with wide eyes and even wider mouths, the rest where babbling furiously - particularly the Slytherins who looked ready to rebel outright. Even the teachers, who had come to satisfy their curiosity about the new subject, were objecting. McGonagall was calling loudly upon Dumbledore to explain what was happening and Snape seemed on the point of having an attack.

"Shut up."

Silence instantly fell across the large room, unbelievably strong in its intensity. Harry stood calmly and watched as several people continued to bluster and rant for several seconds before they realized no sound was escaping their mouths. He had cast a powerful silencing charm over the auditorium and everyone inside it. Not even the teachers would be able to break it.

"Now that I have your complete attention," Harry said, his voice ringing loudly in the silence, "allow me to explain the rules you will adhere to whilst in my class."

He smiled thinly as his green eyes roved over his stunned audience, "I will not tolerate any outbursts during my lessons. Not from any student," Harry rested his gaze on a livid, silently fuming Professor Snape, "or guest."

Harry glanced at Ron, Hermione and Ginny. The three were sitting in the Gryffindor section, eyes on

him and looking to be in various degrees of shock. Ron's mouth was gaping open, Hermione was blinking so rapidly he wondered how she could see and Ginny... Ginny looked as if she was trying to decide if she should run down and smack him or kiss him.

"You will speak only when spoken to," he continued. "If you have anything to say or ask, raise your hand and wait for me to acknowledge you. If you step out of line, well," Harry paused for an ominous second, looking right at Draco Malfoy, "I have alerted Madam Pomfrey to be prepared to receive patients."

He snuck a quick at Dumbledore, who seemed quite amused by Harry's "teaching" methods so far.

"Is this understood?" he asked, watching as most of the thoroughly subdued students and teachers nodded their heads in mute agreement.

"Good."

He gave his wand a casual wave and removed the silencing charm. Immediately several hundred hands shot into the air, seeking permission to speak and ask just what in Merlin's name was going on. Instead of answering anything, Harry pulled a short roll of parchment from his robe and placed it on the podium, starting to read from it. Without looking up he was aware of four spots of light appearing on the stage, surrounding him on all sides, just about fifty feet away.

"Will Professors McGonagall, Sprout, Flitwick and Snape please come down and stand at any of the four places indicated," he asked, indicating the four positions.

Slowly, and somewhat reluctantly, the four professors made their way onto the stage, taking up positions around Harry. Directly in front of him was Sprout, to his left was Flitwick, to his right Snape, which left McGonagall behind him. Harry nodded his approval once they were placed. Immediately twelve other positions lit up, three between each of the teachers.

"Now, will the following students please step down and take up a place."

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Harry looked at the section where the Slytherins were sitting, "Mr Malfoy." He smiled at Malfoy's expression of surprise and called out two other names as the pale boy rose from his seat and made his way to the stage, "Mr Crabbe and Mr Goyle."

Next Harry turned to the Gryffindors, "Messrs. Fred and George Weasley. Mr Jordan."

"Mr Finch-Fletchley. Mr Stein. Ms Jordan," were called down from Hufflepuff

And Ravenclaw provided, "Ms Chang. Mr Renault. Ms Yeager."

Finally the twelve students were on the stage, naturally taking places closest to the heads of their houses. Thus the Hufflepuff students were standing by Professor Sprout, in front of him, the Slytherins were by Snape, at his right, the Ravenclaws at his left with Flitwick and the Weasley twins, alongside their friend Lee Jordan, were arrayed behind him.

Harry tapped the podium once with his wand and it quickly and silently sank into the floor, so completely seamless and flush in placement that it was only distinguished from the surrounding stage floor in that it was a shade darker in colour. Harry slowly prowled around the edge of the sixty or so foot wide circle of sixteen waiting witches and wizards surrounding him.

"Four teachers, the heads of the four houses. Twelve students, taken from those houses, all with different degrees of talent and experience," he spoke as he finished his lap of inspection and returned to stand in the centre of the large stage.

"You will all be fighting me," he told them, "Simultaneously."

Hushed whispers and murmurs swept over the onlookers, surprise and disbelief etched on the faces of everyone watching. Those teachers attending, but not on the stage, were staring at him in wide-eyed consternation, Harry could see Remus Lupin's mouth opening and closing without making a sound. Even Dumbledore, who was usually unflappable, seemed taken aback by Harry's announcement. As for those on the stage...

"What?" exclaimed Malfoy, looking incredulously at him, "Come off it, Potter. You can't honestly think you can beat all of us."

Some quick glances around him confirmed that the others were thinking much the same. Fred and George clearly thought this was a grand joke of some sort, McGonagall was alternately gaping at Harry and glaring at the twins, Justin was shaking his head, Sprout seemed completely dumbstruck, the two Ravenclaw seventh years were staring at him as if he were mad, their head of house, Flitwick, was twittering excitedly and Cho Chang was looking at him funny... Harry turned to look Malfoy in the eyes.

"Yes, Mr Malfoy, that is precisely what I think. I am going to beat all sixteen of you," he told the pale Slytherin, smiling wickedly as he did so, "And what's more, I fully intend to do it without getting so much as a scratch."

Again Harry left the center and starting pacing around and explained, "Your objective is simple, Hit me with everything and anything you've got, the only exception being the three Unforgivable Curses. Other than that, you have free rein to do whatever you like or can think of."

He finished pacing, "It's open season. No holds barred, no punches pulled."

Harry pointed to where Dumbledore was sitting in his elevated chair, "We start when Professor Dumbledore rings the bell," there was a large bronze bell resting on the table in front of the headmaster, "We finish when I'm laid out cold or when all sixteen of you are incapacitated. Any questions?"

The students and teachers exchanged disbelieving looks, clearly wondering exactly what the catch was, because there had to be one. Nobody challenged sixteen people to a duel, especially when four of them were experienced Hogwarts teachers. Finally, it was Snape that spoke up.

"No holds barred, Potter? Free rein?" asked Snape, sneering wickedly.

Harry locked eyes with the Potions Master, "Do your worst," he challenged, drawing his wand.

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Snape deliberately, and with clear relish, withdrew his wand from the folds of his robe, quickly followed by Malfoy and the other two Slytherin boys. After a moment the other three teachers and their students also drew their wands and nodded their readiness. Harry smiled and looked over to Dumbledore and gave a sharp nod.

"Professor Dumbledore? Whenever you feel like it."

The aged wizard nodded and cleared his throat, picking up his wand, which had been lying before him on the table top. Slowly and deliberately he held the wooden stick by the bronze bell and then gave a sharp rap, producing a loud and clear chime that echoed throughout the auditorium.

"Ignis Fatuus Ad Infinitum!" exclaimed Harry, before the ringing had even reached its peak.

There was a flash of white light and when it cleared, after a second, everyone who was watching gasped in surprised amazement. Those who were supposed to be attacking paused in bewilderment and confusion. Harry was no longer alone, or rather, half a dozen Harry Potters were standing in the centre of the stage where there had once been only one. Before anyone could react all six burst into action, running, ducking, jumping and rolling about the stage.

Harry grinned with satisfaction as he came out of his forward roll, only ten feet away from Professor Sprout. The charm he had used produced illusionary copies of the caster, the perfect thing for creating distractions. They weren't solid and when hit by a curse or hex they would vanish without a trace, but Harry had tweaked the spell a little and now whenever one illusion Harry disappeared another two would take its place.

"Naturam Expellas!" Harry shouted with a sharp upwards sweep of his wand. Instantly a mass of thick, fleshy vines burst around the startled Herbology professor, sweeping her in a tight grip that prevented any movement. With a yelp, Sprout found herself shooting into the air as the vines connected with the auditorium's ceiling and left her swaying and dangling helplessly above the stage.

**\*Nice touch, trussing up the Herbology professor with a plant.\***

'Appropriate, Quetz, don't you think?'

However several, if not most, of his opponents had noticed Sprout's demise and had turned their wands and accompanying curses in Harry's direction. Harry ducked to one side and quickly rolled away from where he had been crouching, confident that his attackers would lose him in the chaos engulfing the stage. Already there were nearly two dozen illusions of Harry running amok, all seeming perfectly real, until they disappeared.

Chuckling, Harry weaved a restriction into the spell, restricting the number of duplicates to a maximum of three dozen. He jumped back as a curse shot passed him, just grazing the invisible and nearly impregnable shield he had cast around him. Running across the stage he approached the four Slytherins, all firing off slews of nasty curses. He ducked low and came in next to Crabbe, who failed to notice him until it was too late.

Harry dropped to the floor and spun round, his leg sweeping into Crabbe and sending the bulky boy crashing down. Harry was on his feet and up before Crabbe even hit the floor, firing a simple Stunner as he rose, "Stupefy!"

**\*Good technique. Better get clear though.\***

Malfoy and Snape were the first to pick up on their fellow's fall, both swiveling to fire off a curse at Harry. Unfortunately they had both targeted the same Harry, who turned out to be one of the multitude of illusions cluttering things up. The first curse hit the illusion dead center, causing it to vanish, just as the second curse cleaved through the air. Without an illusion to stop it, the curse hit Goyle square in the chest and knocked him off his feet, unconscious.

'This is fun,' observed Harry, now on the opposite side of the stage, by the Ravenclaw students. He aimed his wand at Barbara Yeager, a pretty seventh-year girl with curly brown hair and hazel eyes, who has just cursed three illusionary Harrys in three different ways.

"Cogito Dementat!"

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An instant later she discarded her wand and attacked her fellow seventh-year, Bill Renault, who had been standing beside her. Renault was shocked and took several sharp blows to the chest and jaw before collecting himself enough to stun her.

"Visersa Reflectii," Harry hissed while the boy was distracted. As Yeager fell limply to the floor, Harry snuck up to Renault and tapped his shoulder. Renault whirled about and had his wand level with Harry's chest, firing off another stunner, unaware that Harry had cast a reflecting spell upon him. The older boy promptly joined Yeager on the floor, victim of his own curse.

**\*You're right, this is fun.\***

'Wait and see, Loki, I'm just getting warmed up.'

Ducking away from the two remaining Ravenclaws and into the crowd of Harrys littering the stage, Harry took careful aim. "Expelliarmus!" Almost instantly the curse, hardly slowed even after it had passed through and dissipated three illusionary Harrys, struck its intended target.

The curse hit Snape with such force the professor was knocked off his feet and sent flying back a good ten or twelve yards, his wand wrenched from his hand. "Ferris Solidificus Bindus!" declared Harry as the winded Potions Master struggled to his hands and knees. Instantly two pairs of iron manacles grew from the stage floor, clamping down on Snape's wrists and ankles before he even knew they were there.

**\*Oh,\*** observed a female voice, **\*Into bondage are you, Harry?\***

'Hardly, Miko, but I think Snape is, if you're interested,' he replied with a smirk.

**\*Eew! Forget I asked."**

Harry turned his attention back to the three Hufflepuff students, who seemed more determined to get their head of house down than trying to get Harry. His eyes fell upon Justin Finch-Fletchley, who was trying unsuccessfully to remove the vines suspending Sprout above them. A wicked smile crossed Harry's lips.

"Serpensortia!" he yelled, drawing Justin's attention as he had planned. Justin remembered all too well the last time he had heard that particular curse being used. He spun around to find a twenty foot long python slithering rapidly towards him.

~Disarm and restrain him,~ Harry ordered the snake, ~Don't bite.~

A moment later, accompanied by a shriek of terror, Justin found himself firmly wrapped up in the coils of the snake. Too scared to even think about moving he whimpered as his legs gave out and he toppled to the ground. This time, he knew, Harry had ordered the snake after him.

As the remaining two Hufflepuffs stared in horror at Justin's snake ensnared form and then set about wildly firing curses at anything moving, Harry turned his attention to the only house as yet unattacked. His own. Gryffindor. McGonagall, with Fred and George on either side, and Lee standing next to George, was methodically sweeping the stage with hexes.

Ducking and weaving towards them, Harry avoided most of the curses flying about, save one or two which were deflected by his shield. As he reached the four Gryffindors, he saw McGonagall spot him and recognize that he was not an illusion. Before she do anything, however, he fired off a quick charm which had interesting results.

"Alter Idem!"

A moment later Professor McGonagall collapsed, unconscious, to the floor, having been hit at point blank range by two stunners from Fred and George, who were beaming with delight. Their smiles of triumph quickly faded, however, as the limp body between them changed from the image of an unconscious Harry Potter, which Harry had cast upon her, into a now unconscious Minerva McGonagall.

"Oh-"

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"-shit."

Lee Jordon, peering over George's shoulder, winced, "She's gonna flay the two of you alive for this, y'know that right?" Before he could get an answer he found himself staring at a pair of small yellow canaries with oversized heads, who fluttered about.

"I tought I taw a puddy tat!" chirped the one that had been Fred, now perched on McGonagall's left shoulder.

"I did, I did taw a puddy tat!" replied the other, George, who was sitting on her right.

Despite himself Lee burst into laughter. After all the times the two pranksters had turned some unwitting student, usually Neville, into a canary, the irony of this was almost enough to send Lee rolling on the floor.

**\*You are evil, Harry.\***

'You have no idea,' he smirked, "Vino Dementia!"

A wave of giddy dizziness washed over Lee and a moment later he was rolling on the floor, completely unaware that Harry had just made him drunker than he would ever be again, even on the night of his bachelor party. Soon after that Lee was singing dirty and badly rhyming songs, his participation in the fight unquestionably over.

Suddenly, Harry spotted the diminutive form of Professor Flitwick striding forward into the wild multitude of illusion Harrys. He raised his wand and in a commanding voice shouted, "Aparecium Lux Revelatio Dispersium!"

**\*There goes our cover.\***

There was a bright blue-white flash and slowly, one by one, the Harrys started to flicker and disappear from the stage. Realizing that the Charms professor had managed to nullify his spell, Harry opened fire.

"Wingardium Leviosa Furor!"

It was somehow fitting to watch as the tiny wizard rose twenty feet into the air. Before he could respond, however, the second part of the spell set in and Flitwick began to twirl about like a spinning top. Within a matter of moments he was a blur of motion, resembling a small tornado as he slowly dropped to the floor. Just before he touched down the spinning stopped and he came to rest gently, passed out from the centrifugal force.

**\*An interesting spin on things.\***

Miko's voice sighed, **\*Terrible pun, Loki.\***

By now Harry had hurried into the center of the stage, the three dozen illusion Harrys now gone, leaving him open and exposed to his four remaining opponents. Still facing where the Ravensclaws had stood, Harry fired a curse at Cho Chang, the cute asian girl that had at one point been his crush the previous year. "Vis Inertia!" Immediately Cho froze where she was standing, like a statue poised in mid movement.

Harry spun towards the two surviving Hufflepuffs. "Taedium Ennuil!" he snapped at Lillian Jordon, no relation to Lee. She was a pretty sixth-year girl with long blonde hair, large blue eyes and round glasses that made her look extraordinarily cute. A moment after the curse hit her, Lillian tucked her wand into her robes, sat down and curled into ball on the floor and drifted to sleep.

"Petrificus Transit Aurum!" this hex was cast before the first one had even hit Lillian. By the time she

had started putting her wand away, the sole surviving Hufflepuff, Dave Stein, was almost instantly transformed into a gleaming golden statue, only his eyes remaining normal and able to move.

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"Stupefy!" the shouted curse came from Harry's right and he turned just as it hit him square on the chest. Or would have, had it not been deflected by the powerful shield barrier surrounding Harry. Harry smiled at Malfoy's surprised expression, clearly the Slytherin boy had expected him to topple over and leave him the "winner".

'Yeah, and after I do that for him, I'll go and give Voldemort a foot massage.'

**\*Don't get cocky, son,\*** admoshed a stern voice, **\*If it hadn't been for the shield charm...\***

'I can handle Malfoy, Rem.'

Malfoy stood frozen where he was as Harry slowly approached him, walking with an almost erotic satisfaction in his movements. He was looking at Malfoy from beneath his lashes and his grin was sending nervous shivers down the pale boy's spine. Finally they were standing almost toe-to-toe, barely a yard between them.

"Remember Mad-Eye Moody?" Harry's grin broadened as he saw the meaning of his words sink in. With a clatter Malfoy's wand fell to the floor of the stage and Harry looked down, chuckling as he took in the sight of the pure white ferret sitting at his feet. With a flick of his wand the ferret was bobbing gently in the air before him, although a sudden panic had taken hold of it and it was frantically scrabbling about and making small keening noises. Harry shot a glance over to where his friends were sitting and watching.

"So, Mr Malfoy," he smiled evilly, "Should I make you bounce or not?"

**\*You are sooo evil.\***

'I took lessons.'

He winked at Ron, who was grinning like a madman and seemed on the verge of a blissful rapture. Hermione was trying to scowl in disapproval, but couldn't stop her lips from twitching into a smile as she elbowed Ron in the ribs.

After allowing Draco Malfoy, the amazing bouncing ferret, to writhe in midair for half a minute, as he surveyed the damage inflicted upon the other fifteen "contestants", Harry lowered the poor boy to the ground. Harry strode to his place in the centre of the stage, where the lecturing podium rose out from the floor.

"Finite Incantatem."

Making a broad sweep of the stage Harry watched as the various spells, charms, hexes and curses he had used were negated. Quite amusing was Fred and George's reaction to being relieved of the Tweety Bird transfiguration Harry had applied to them. Only moments before he had done so, the twins had stunned Professor McGonagall, mistakenly believing her to be Harry. Now they were with great reluctance and trepidation deciding which of them would be the one to revive her.

Finally the sixteen teachers and students were all back on their feet and standing in their chosen places, albeit some less steady than others. Harry met the eyes of each one in turn as he gave them a grateful nod and thanks.

"Thank you all for your help," he said, "You may return to your seats now."

As the chosen few made their way off the stage and back to their places throughout the auditorium Harry appraised the expressions of those who had been watching. All-in-all it was much as he had expected to see. Some of them were staring at him in open horror, frightened to think that they were stuck in the same school as a boy who could do all that and not break a sweat. Others were looking on with wide-eyed awe and admiration, Colin Creevey in particular was wearing an uplifted expression on his face. Still more seemed thoughtful, considering what had happened and what it implied, both about Harry and for themselves.

"You have seen what this class is all about," he said, "Tomorrow, those of you who return will learn what it is all about."

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He looked towards a pair of fourth-year Gryffindor boys, who seemed excited by the prospect. "I will not be teaching you how to defend yourselves," he told them, nodding towards Remus, who was standing at the back of the auditorium, "That's Professor Lupin's job."

Harry turned his gaze to Dumbledore, "What I will teach you, is how to fight."

"You do not need to be strong," he said, glancing at Crabbe and Goyle, both slumped in their seats, neither looking more than partially recovered from the demonstration.

"You do not need to be fast," Harry turned his gaze to Cho, sitting with her fellow sixth-years in the Ravenclaw section, watching him closely.

"You do not need to be brilliant," he looked at Hermione, who was looking exceptionally nervous about the idea of actively participating in anything like what she had just seen.

"or good at Transfiguration..." he continued, looking from face to face as he spoke, "or DADA... or Charms... or Potions..."

He drew back and swept his gaze over them all.

"All I need you to be... is willing to work. Willing to listen. Willing to practice. Willing to get back on your feet after I knock you on your ass for the hundredth time."

Harry narrowed his eyes and, with a thin smile, finished this little impromptu speech he had thought up whilst knocking his teachers and classmates around with casual ease.

"By the end of class tomorrow, you will be afraid of me."

"By the end of the week, you will actively dislike me."

"By the end of the month, you will hate my guts with a passion."

"By the end of the year, you will wish you had never met me or that I had never been born."

"But when you come face-to-face with a real, live, Death Eater... you will consider me the best thing that has ever happened to you."

"So..." Harry leaned forward, elbows propped on the podium, and asked, "who's got the balls to come back down here for tomorrow night's lesson?"

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## 7. A Simple Explanation

As he had once told Hedwig, before his third year at Hogwarts, it had been a very weird night. Not tonight though, no, not tonight. The night in question, was the night of Harry's fifteenth birthday, which had been a very weird night. Which was certainly putting it mildly.

*'Apparently, along with my multitude of other new talents, I have also mastered understatement.'*

As near as Harry could tell, and his resident house guests confirmed this, that night Harry had become something more than he had been the day before. Don't ask what he had become, because at that point Harry only had the vaguest notions and even now, a month later, he was still not entirely clear on some things.

*'Most things, actually.'*

Now, half an hour after the conclusion of Harry's demonstration of the Practical Fighting Techniques class, he and his three companions were sitting inside Dumbledore's office, awaiting the arrival of the headmaster so that certain things could be explained. Harry had insisted, after Ron, Hermione and Ginny had confronted him at the class' end, that the venerable wizard would explain everything that he knew.

Naturally Harry had forgotten to mention that what little Dumbledore knew about Harry's situation could barely be considered the tip of the iceberg. In fact, as far as everyone other than Harry himself was considered, they were in the middle of the Sahara desert, thousands of miles away from *any* icebergs. For some reason, Harry had the feeling he was digging himself a hole with all that he was withholding from his friends and mentors. A very deep and very dark hole.

And so there they sat, waiting, in silence.

After all, how do you explain to your two best friends and the girl you now consider a close friend, confidant and perhaps even a prospective something more, that you have serious doubts about your own sanity?

*'I must be out of my mind.'* Harry gave a mental sigh.

***\*Don't worry, Harry. You are very much in your mind,\**** chirped an annoying voice, ***\*After all, we're all in here with you.\****

*'I rest my case.'*

Yep, Harry had serious doubts about his sanity. Regularly. Since that fateful night when he had found himself somewhere other than Privet Drive, he had been wondering if something inside his tormented mind had finally given way. That would be the simplest explanation. Especially since Harry was fairly certain he had never actually left the Dursley household. Which was just slightly confusing, since he *knew* he had been somewhere else.

*'Does that make sense?'*

***\*If you're waiting for the universe to make sense, Harry,\**** observed one of his more soft-spoken voices, ***\*You'll be waiting for a very, very long time.\****

*'Thanks, Sun,'* he sighed, *'I hadn't figured that out already.'*

And to make matters worse, Harry had been somewhere else (Damned if he knew where exactly) for a considerably longer period of time than he had been away (from Privet Drive). There was no other way to explain how he had grown a good inch and a bit in the few minutes that his half working nightstand alarm clock said had passed while he had been elsewhere.

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By the end of the first week, much to the Dursley's alarm and his own amusement, he had put on nearly a foot of height. Each day since his birthday Harry would leave the confines of his room and, for that matter, the house as well, and spend anywhere from, what he perceived as, a week to a month "elsewhere". Whenever he asked where he was precisely, which he did every time he was there, he always got the same unenlightening answer.

The Grand Hall of the Phoenix.

When he got back to Privet Drive, always only five minutes to half an hour after "leaving", he would make his way into the bathroom and perform a thorough examination of his person. It had only been a few days before he had gone to Diagon Alley that he had stopped finding something slightly different about his body with each check up.

Not that he was complaining. Much. After all, the looks on Vernon, Petunia and Dudley's faces that first morning had been priceless. He could easily understand their reactions. After all, he had halfdragged himself up the stairs the previous evening, exhausted from the strenuous array of chores Aunt Petunia had set for him. Thus the three Dursleys could scarcely believe it when Harry strode into the kitchen the morning of his birthday, his hair for the first time in his life neat and tidy, at least on the sides, his stance straight and proud, his worn clothes not hanging quite as loose on his frame, his glasses nowhere in sight and his wand in hand.

That had probably been the biggest shock. That Harry had his wand with him and openly displayed. Either that or the fact that he completely ignored them and immediately began cooking himself a massive stack of blueberry pancakes, using said wand to make the meal cook itself while he sat down

at the table and began paging through the parts of newspaper Vernon had already finished with. *'Now if I had only known that spell from the start,'* Harry mused, thinking back to the very first thing he had done upon returning from his first visit to the Grand Hall of the Phoenix. It had been a quick and surprisingly simple spell that masked his magical signature, effectively making it possible for Harry, and Harry alone, to perform magic inside number four Privet Drive without risk of detection from the Ministry of Magic.

It had been the first spell, a truly ancient and long forgotten one, that his new companions had taught him. He had explained to them how he was unable to practice any of the wide selection of magic they knew and had passed onto him in what was possibly the single most painful experience of his life. Next to being inducted into the Order of the Phoenix, the Cruciatus Curse seemed like a kiss on the cheek from a pretty girl.

*'Hell, it even made the pain I felt when Voldemort touched me seem like nothing.'*

***\*The benefits do outweigh that one little bug in the process, don't you agree?\****

*'Don't think I'm complaining, but becoming a 'studly hunk of manflesh' as Parvati and Lavender put it this morning, was not what I had in mind,'* he noted wryly.

***\*We had to do it, you know that,\**** explained a voice that he knew as Alexander, ***\*We can't very well have a shrimp fighting a Dark Lord now, can we?\****

"I was *not* a shrimp!" Harry protested, realizing too late that he had spoken out loud. It was only after the other three occupants of Dumbledore's office jerked in their seats, Ron almost falling out of his, that Harry realized just how very unsettling and uncomfortable the silence surrounding them had become whilst he was lost in his thoughts.

"Um," was Ron's eloquent reply to Harry's blurted assertion.

"Er... of course you're not, Harry," confirmed Hermione, cautiously, just as she would speak to someone mentally instable.

Harry sighed, *'That's the problem. I am mentally instable!'*

***\*Why do you say that?\****

*'Dammit Rom, I hear voices in my mind! What other explanation is there?'*

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"Sorry if I startled you," he apologized to his friends, noting how nervous they suddenly were. *'Except Ginny,'* he noted, feeling a strange warmth in his stomach at this observation. She was looking nervous, no denying it, but it was different somehow. More, he thought, because of their surroundings than his unexpected outburst

***\*At this rate, I'm betting you'll be married before you graduate.\****

*'Rem!'*

***\*Yes, Rem, stop teasing the poor lad.\****

***\*Come on, Rom. If he's finding this embarrassing, just imagine the wedding night!\****

***\*Now I remember why they named the city, the empire even, after me and not you.\****

***\*Oooh, low blow, brother mine.\****

Harry sighed and propped his chin in his hands, staring tiredly at the low burning fire that was crackling in the fireplace. "I was just... having an argument," he tried to explain, realizing as he said the words just how strange and unbalanced that sounded.

"An argument with who, Harry?" asked Ron.

"Whom," corrected Hermione, distractedly, her eyes set firmly upon Harry.

Harry smiled tiredly and shrugged, "Myself." He saw the look his two friends exchanged and sighed a second time. They *were* starting to think he was off his rocker, "Don't worry about it," he tried to allay their concerns, "I'm not schizophrenic and I'm not hearing voices no one else can hear either. I'm just... just having an argument."

***\*Last time I checked, Harry, no one else CAN hear us.\****

*'You can all hear each other, can't you? Which means I'm hearing voices that people other than myself can hear.'*

***\*You've been talking to Sun too much. He's corrupting you with all that Eastern philosophy and Asian mysticism double talk.\****

*'Maybe, but he and I are amateurs next to Dumbledore.'*

He then made the mistake of looking at Ginny. Her bottomless chocolate brown eyes locked with his and suddenly he felt a terribly combination of warmth, mixed with shame at the fact that he was hiding the truth. Especially when he was hiding it from her. By the time he managed to tear his gaze away from her his mouth was dry, his stomach fluttering and his voices elated.

***\*Our Harry,\**** sniffed Loki, ***\*All grown up and chasing after the tavern wenches.\****

*'Ginny is not...'* Harry resisted the temptation to throw his arms up in defeat, but could not prevent doing the mental equivalent. If he had to have voices in his head why couldn't they have been more... reasonable and less like the Weasley twins?

A sudden weight settled on his shoulder and Harry looked up at Professor Dumbledore's magnificent red plumed phoenix. Fawkes settled down comfortably and whistled a soft greeting, causing Harry to recall his fifteenth birthday and his impromptu visit to Hogwarts and Dumbledore.

\*\*\*

- One Month Ago -

Mid morning, 31st July

Harry, feeling strangely invigorated from his journey to Hogwarts, despite the great distance traversed, not to mention the fact that it should have been impossible for a wizard as young as Harry to make such a journey, looked around Dumbledore's circular office. No matter how often he was here, Harry

always found himself fascinated by the many odds and ends littered about the place. The only difference between now and prior visits was that Harry suddenly knew what most of Dumbledore's artifacts, trinkets and gizmos were.

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**\*A benefit and common side effect of being part of the Phoenix Order, young Harry.\***

*'Thanks, Iphicles,' he thought snidely, 'I'd forgotten that already.'*

**\*Harry...\***

*'Come on, Heracles,' he accused, 'Your brother insists on treating me like a doddering old fool who would forget my head if it weren't firmly attached to my shoulders!'*

**\*Yes, he gets that from our father.\***

*'Good thing he's not in the Order. I'd be forced to kill him.'*

**\*We're already dead, Harry.\***

*'Like that's gonna stop me,'* Harry snorted and continued his examination of the headmaster's office, stopping as he spotted Fawkes perched on his stand in one corner. The ancient and tattered Sorting Hat was sitting on the table beside the phoenix, Godric Gryffindor's gleaming silver sword resting on a red velvet cushion alongside it.

"Hullo, Fawkes," he said, moving towards the bird, "You're looking well."

Fawkes bowed his head and trilled softly, *~Many thanks, Lord of the Phoenix Order. You seem well yourself, certainly better than the last time we met.~*

Harry blinked.

He blinked again.

*'First snakes and now phoenixes. Great. You people never mentioned this,'* he thought.

**\*Um... oops?\***

*'Oops?'*

**\*Don't look at me, that was supposed to be Quetzalcoatl's job!\***

**\*Not mine! Zuma was supposed to do it!\***

"Thank you, Fawkes," He replied, feeling a bit off-balance at this new development. However he wasn't so off-balance that Harry couldn't mount a dig at his new companions. "Although I think I would be a bit better off if I didn't have a standup comedy routine going on in my head."

**\*Oi!\***

Fawkes chirped his amusement and hopped lightly onto Harry's shoulder, *~Professor Dumbledore is down in the Great Hall, having a late brunch,~* the phoenix whistled softly.

"I can wait, I guess."

With Fawkes perched on his shoulder, Harry crossed the large office and settled himself down in the unbelievably comfortable chair behind Dumbledore's enormous, claw-footed desk. Heck, the desk was nearly larger than Harry's bedroom back in Privet Drive. Nearly.

"I hope the headmaster is not having an overly long meal," he sighed, sinking contently into the overstuffed seat. Dumbledore must have put a Comfortability Charm or something similar on it, no ordinary chair felt that good.

**\*Mmmmm, foood...\***

Harry sighed. "I just ate a stack of pancakes taller than a house elf. How could you possibly be hungry? Besides, as Heracles just reminded me, you're dead!"

**\*S easy.\***

Having a full chamber choir in his head was going to take some getting used to.

\*\*\*

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Ginny watched as Harry became lost to the world once again, absently reaching up to stroke his fingers over Fawkes' scarlet feather coat. The phoenix trilled softly and Ginny could swear that Harry was able to understand what the bird singing. He was smiling slightly, just as he did when he and his friends exchanged a private joke, known only to them. His eyes had that faraway look she had seen two nights before, on a grassy knoll in the back corner of the Weasley garden.

*'Where do you go, Harry?'* she wondered, *'And why can't I go with you?'*

When they had confronted Harry after his demonstration of Practical Fighting Techniques, Ginny had met staunch opposition against her inclusion from her brother. After all, Ron was Harry's best friend and did not think his baby sister had any business prying into the affairs of the infamous Terrible Trio. The three friends were inseparable and despite Harry's inclusion of her into recent conversations and the many secrets he had shared with her that night, Ginny doubted that she would ever truly be a part of their group.

Only when Harry had very forcibly proclaimed that Ginny was to be included in the forthcoming explanation, which he said Dumbledore would provide, had Ron consented to allow her to join the trio as they made their way to the headmaster's office. As far as she knew, and from what she overheard Ron and Hermione whispering about along the way, this was the first time any of them, besides Harry, had been to Dumbledore's inner sanctum.

It was... different from what Ginny had expected.

"Hullo all," greeted Dumbledore as the door swung open behind them, "I hope I have not kept you waiting long? The staff had a few questions they wanted me to answer."

"I'm afraid we have a few more for you to answer, sir," said Harry, rising from his seat as the headmaster entered the office, "Well, my friends do that is. I thought it would be best if you explained things to them."

Dumbledore smiled at Harry as he moved to his chair behind his desk, "Of course, Harry. I would be

happy to oblige. Although, after your admirable presentation this evening, I do not think you would have any trouble doing so yourself."

Ginny smiled as Harry blushed and ducked his head. He hated having attention. Now that she was thinking about it, Ginny realized just how much determination it must have taken Harry to step onto the stage, before the entire school nearly, and start talking.

"Ah, I see young Ms Weasley has joined your group," Dumbledore observed, startling Ginny out of her reverie.

"She has?" asked Ron and Hermione, both turning to look at her.

"I have?" Ginny instead turned to look at Harry, who was watching her intently, and blushed slightly as she asked tentatively, "I have?"

She watched through her lashes as Harry looked at Dumbledore, then across at Ron and Hermione and then finally back at Ginny before nodding his agreement, his consent. Whether the other two liked it or not, she was now a part of the trio, or more accurately now, the quartet. When Harry spoke, his two simple words made her feel as if her heart were about to explode.

"She has."

\*\*\*

Harry watched and listened with one ear as Dumbledore gave his two friends and Ginny the short version of their meeting a month ago and their more recent meeting the day before Harry had gone to the Burrow. It was a reasonably accurate and fairly detailed recounting of those events, one of the reasons Harry had asked the headmaster to be the one to explain everything.

What little he knew, at least.

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After all, as far as Dumbledore knew, and explained to the others, Harry had experienced the equivalent of a "growth spurt" in his magical powers. At least that was what Harry had told him when he had come up from the Great Hall only to find Harry lounging casually behind his desk, apparently having apparated from Little Whinging to Hogsmeade and then stealthily trekking from the village to the school. That is how Harry had explained his unexpected presence at Hogwarts and Dumbledore had no reason to doubt his story. Why should he?

Besides, as Hermione was constantly telling them; it was supposedly impossible to apparate or disapparate on Hogwarts grounds.

That's what she had read in *Hogwarts: A History*, which meant it had to be true.

Harry did not want to disillusion her. Or give Voldemort any ideas.

As for the exact extent of his powers, Harry had hidden a great deal of that from Dumbledore as well, making certain the headmaster saw only a fraction of what he was capable of. When asked what his limits were, Harry had pretty much pulled an answer out of thin air and used that.

He didn't think he had any limits. At least not that he was aware of.

***\*Oh, you have limits, Harry,\* a voice said, \*It's just a question of if you will ever encounter a situation where you will deplete your powers faster than you can replenish them.\****

*'Did that ever happen to you or any of the others?'*

***\*Never.\****

Harry turned his attention back to the present and listened as Dumbledore wrapped up his tale of how Harry had written to him a week before term began.

"Harry's proposal was unexpected," he was telling the other children, "But considering both the state of affairs regarding Voldemort's return and Harry's own exceptional abilities in the field of magical combat, I found myself unable to refuse the idea."

"But, where did you learn all those spells?" asked Hermione, turning to Harry, "I mean, most of them I recognized from class and some of our books for this year and stuff I've checked out of the library over the years, but some of them... That duplicate spell..."

Harry turned from where he was standing, looking out the window and over the still waters of the Hogwarts lake, "Since Voldemort returned..." he paused as Ron twitched anxiously, then continued,

"Since he came back, I've been making preparations, taking precautions. Quietly."

Leaving the window, Harry made his way to where they were gathered around the fireplace and sat down beside them, "I took a good number of books home from the library at the end of last year. After all our studying for the Third Task, I had a good idea which ones would contain something that I could use in the future. To top it off, you sent me a book on curses and hexes, Ron sent me a book on chess strategies and Hagrid sent me a great bleeding sword. I didn't spend my time at the Dursleys sitting around and twiddling my thumbs."

"Also," he sank back into his chair, "You three are not the only people I was corresponding with. I must have owled nearly every auror in Britain, asking for information about what they did and how they did it. I wrote to historians, curse-breakers, potion brewers, healers, everyone in any profession where I thought could learn something I might need."

This was a calculated lie on Harry's part, he had exchanged letters over the holidays with only Ron, Hermione and Ginny. But a good portion of what he now knew could not be found in books or scrolls or tomes or anything. In fact, some of it was considered "lost" over the passage of time. He had to tell them something and saying that the voices in his head told him would not go down all that well.

"Along with my 'growth spurt' as the professor put it," he nodded at his mentor, "I've developed pretty good memory and information retention. It's almost photographic. Everything I learn stays learnt, even after only one looking over."

"That's how you knew that potion in Sna- Professor Snape's class this morning!" exclaimed Ron.

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Harry nodded, "Despite what our resident Death Eater may say, I'm pretty good at potions. The only reason my marks are as low as they are is because he marks me down all the time."

Dumbledore gave Harry a slightly chiding look, silently berating him for speaking ill of one of his teachers. With a glance at Ginny, he had obviously noted her lack of reaction at the mention of Snape's "night job", he quickly realized that she had become more integrated into Harry's circle of friends than he originally thought.

"Which I believe sums it up," Dumbledore concluded, "After agreeing with Harry that teaching our students to fight on a more practical level than is taught in Defense Against the Dark Arts, we had but to arrange a time and a place to supply your instruction. The rest you know."

*'Hardly. They, and you, know only what you need to know,' thought Harry, 'No more.'*

"So," Ron looked at Harry, "What other surprises have you been keeping from the rest of us?"

Harry smiled mischievously, "If I told you, they wouldn't be surprises any more, would they?"

***\*You're not going to tell them? Why not?\****

*'Because there's no need for them to know everything, Alex,' explained Harry.*

*'Not unless something drastic happens...'*

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## 8. Sighting the Enemy

Absolute silence greeted Harry as he entered the Great Hall, the morning after his PFT class. As far as he was aware, he could think of three reasons for this, all of which he could understand. First there was the fact that Harry was Hogwarts' Practical Fighting Techniques instructor, who had singlehandedly fought and beaten sixteen opponents as a demonstration. Naturally the school was abuzz about his first lesson and everyone eager to see if he would be doing something crazy or maniacal while they watched.

***\*The day is still young...\****

Second was the fact that Harry had entered the Great Hall in a manner so unlike how he had in the past, everyone stood up to take notice. He was striding along at a very brisk clip, his black robes billowing about him almost as if they were alive. His posture was upright, tall, straight and proud, combined with a sureness of movement that leant him an air of determination, purpose and confidence that one seldom found in any but the most seasoned wizards.

***\*Image is everything.\****

Thirdly, something that truly defied belief, Harry had his nose buried in the pages of a book.

A very big book.

It was most definitely the largest book anybody had ever seen, including the teachers. In fact, the tome was so massive, Harry had cast a charm on it, allowing him to walk briskly along while the book itself floated just ahead of him. This was a good arrangement, since it seemed unlikely that anybody, even Harry with his newly developed physique, could lift the book without pulling most, if not all, of their muscles. As books went, it was the great-great grandfather of books. At first glance it was perhaps four feet tall, half that wide and easily a foot and a half thick when closed.

In other words, it was a very big book.

"Bugger me," breathed Angelina Johnson in amazement as Harry silently, and seemingly oblivious, made his way towards the Gryffindor table.

"Not now, luv," replied Fred, sitting opposite her, eyes firmly on the approaching Harry.

George, sitting beside his twin, added teasingly, "Maybe after lunch."

Harry, who despite appearances was completely aware of everything going on in the hall, didn't bother lifting his head, but commented as he strode passed, "Just make sure you don't tire yourselves out. I'm going to be calling students down for evaluation tonight."

Ignoring their horrified expressions, either from the thought of Harry "evaluating" them during PFT that night, or the idea that Harry had just made a slightly lewd insinuation that they had not come to expect from him, Harry continued on his way down the length of the table. Ron, with Ginny beside him, was sitting opposite Hermione, the couple apparently so engrossed in one of their ritual arguments that they remained ignorant of his entrance.

"Honestly, Ron," he heard Hermione complain as he approached, "Your handwriting is so bad I sometimes think you should consider becoming a doctor."

"What does that mean?" protested Ron, looking unsure whether to take the comment as an insult or a compliment.

Hermione gestured at the sheet of parchment she was looking over, "This essay of yours is a complete mess. How can you expect Professor Binns to be able to read, no, decipher it?"

Ron rolled his eyes and retorted, "Like anybody's actually interested in some long dead dark wizard called Veto the Corinthian, Mione."

"Vigo the Carpathian," corrected Hermione, "Born 1505. Died 1610."

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"A hundred and five years old, he hung in there, didn't he?" observed Ginny, looking impressed.

Hermione shook her head and delivered a short litany of gore, "He didn't die of old age, either. He was poisoned, stabbed, shot, hung, stretched, disembowelled, drawn and quartered."

Ron stared at her with wide eyes and his mouth gaping like a carp. Harry smirked as he sat down beside Hermione, the massive tome hovering beside them for a moment before disappearing as he reached for a piece of toast.

"Ouch," he summed up dryly, enjoying the sudden dumbstruck expression Hermione wore after having caught a glimpse of the huge book he had been reading before he had made it vanish. "Just

some light reading," he whispered to her in a quiet aside.

"Ouch?" asked Ron, looking over at him. "Ouch? Is that all you can say?"

"At least they didn't castrate him," Harry answered, grinning wickedly at his friend's wince of sympathetic pain. He looked to Ginny, at Ron's side, and saw that she too was grinning wickedly at her brother's imagined discomfort. She continued tucking in to her bacon and eggs, consuming the food almost as fast as her brothers were prone to doing.

*'Doing what I'm about to do - in public - has got to be the dumbest idea I have ever had.'*

***\*That's saying something.\****

"Ginny?" he asked, calling her attention.

"Yes, Harry?" she replied with a smile.

Harry licked his lips. After last night, this should be easy. In theory it was, but now that he was on the verge of the practical application, he discovered otherwise, "Do you remember what we discussed over the summer? In our letters?"

Ginny nodded thoughtfully, "Yeah, but which part?"

He smiled, "The bit about you looking better in cream and silver than in green and lilac."

"Oh, that bit," Ginny smiled shyly and blushed a warm red.

***\*You're so smooth.\****

"We were wondering if there'd be another ball," Harry confirmed, "And I believe you asked me a question."

Ginny looked up at him in surprise and, it looked like... hope? He prayed that it was. That made things a lot less nerve wracking for Harry if she did want to--

*'You're getting ahead of yourself, Potter,'* he berated, *'You've got to ask her first.'*

***\*So ask already!\****

"Well," he continued, amazed at how steady his voice sounded considering how queasy his stomach was feeling, "I've got an answer if you'd like to hear it."

He could see Ron and Hermione watching with interest as Ginny swallowed nervously and placed her knife and fork down. She licked her lips and looked up at him, barely breathing as she gave him a miniscule nod.

"Who are you going to take?" she asked in a whisper, her chocolate eyes wide and hopeful.

Just as Harry opened his mouth to tell her an ear-splitting shriek, followed by many other yells and shouts of surprise and horror, sounded from near the main entrance into the hall. Students were jumping up onto their tables, drawing and fumbling with their wands and making one god awful racket that quickly had the entire room's attention.

***\*Now zis eez unexpected,\**** noted a soft, French accented, alto.

*'Only because nobody has been killed yet, Joan.'*

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Harry was on his feet in an instant, watching with wary, yet keen, interest as a massive snake glided down the middle of the hall, eliciting more screams and other reactions from the students as it made its way towards where Harry was standing. Looking closely as the serpent drew nearer; Harry recognised its markings and stepped before it, drawing his wand.

"Nagini," he greeted, holding his ground as the snake slithered to a rest immediately in front of him and wound itself into a coil.

*~Harry Potter,~* hissed the snake, *~I come bearing a messsage from my massster.~*

Harry cocked an eyebrow at Nagini and swished his wand between himself and the coiled snake, casting a special translation spell that would allow everyone in the Great Hall to hear what was being said and understand it. Even if it was parseltongue.

*~Really?~* he replied making sure to meet and match Nagini's stare, *~And what does your esteemed master, Lord Voldemort, have to say for himself, hmm?~*

Nagini hissed and lifted her head level with Harry's, unblinking reptilian eyes locked on his unblinking emerald ones. Harry refused to back down for any man or beast. Especially if they associated with the dark lord.

*~Massster sssaysss that the time of his preparation isss over,~* reported the snake, *~Sssoon the Dark Mark ssshall be known acrosssss the land onccce more.~*

"No shit," chirped Harry, *~And his point is?~*

Nagini hissed angrily, *~Do not inssult the massster!~*

*~Deliver the rest of your message, snake,~* Harry ordered, dismissing the threat, *~Before I decide to turn you into a new pair of boots and matching luggage.~*

*~My massster will make you sssuffer the pain of a thousssand deathsss before he killsss you. You and all who follow your banner ssshall become hisss ssslavesss. Hisss dark reign isss begining and he ssshall rule in eternal darknessss for all time.~*

*~He does like to rehash everything, doesn't he?~* observed Harry dryly, *~Tell me something I did not already know.~*

The snake quivered angrily, *~Lord Voldemort isss coming for you, Harry Potter, jussst asss he came for your parentsss in yearsss passst. What wasss will be, what isss will be no more. Thisss isss your only warning. Thisss isss my messsage.~*

Harry shook his head in disgust, *~Then you're wasting my time, Nagini. Go back to your master. Inform him that a phoenix will always be able to triumph over a basilisk, regardless of how long and hard the battle may become.~*

*~Ssso be it,~* hissed Nagini, dropping her head down and uncoiling her great length, before slowly winding her way out of the hall. *~The massster ssshall know your wordsss, Harry Potter.~*

"He'll know more than that when I'm finished with him," muttered Harry, watching Voldemort's messenger leave.

***\*Of zat we can be be sure, 'Arry,\* confirmed Joan.***

Pandemonium had begun to erupt throughout the hall, reminding Harry acutely of his first year, when Professor Quirrel had come running in, announcing at the top of his lungs an intrusion into the castle by a large mountain troll. Of course, this had been five years ago and Harry had since become inured to such goings on.

Unfortunately his fellow students had not taken Nagini's arrival, proclamations and departure with quite the same degree of calm level-headedness that seemed enshrouded about Harry.

***\*Is it just me, or are they panicking?\****

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*'It's just you, Iolaus,'* he sighed, turning away from where Nagini had exited and facing the staff table, where Dumbledore was rising to his feet. It had never failed to amaze Harry how the old wizard could be such a pillar of stability and calm amidst the chaos of the uproar sweeping about the Great Hall. "Silence!" rumbled Dumbledore, his deep voice quickly causing the room to still. Heads turned towards where he was standing and some students, particularly the shorter ones, climbed up onto the benches to get a clear view.

"There is no need for such pandemonium," the headmaster declared sternly, his blue eyes gleaming over the top of his half-moon spectacles. "Classes will continue normally today and I expect you all to proceed to them in a calm and dignified manner. Prefects will please escort all the first year students to their classes before proceeding to their own."

Something resembling the calm and dignified manner Dumbledore had asked for began to make itself known as the students collected their things and began to jostle about.

"Mr. Potter," Dumbledore intoned, "May I have a word before you leave?"

Much like Percy, five years earlier, Hermione was in her element. Most of the Gryffindors were already on their way to their classes, with Hermione and the other Prefects shepherding them to and fro. Harry was clearly not needed in helping to restore order, so he grabbed his satchel of books and materials and turned to make his way to where Dumbledore was waiting for him.

He had not managed to take more than a half dozen steps when he was suddenly and unexpectedly accosted by Ginny, who pushed in front of him and grabbed Harry by the arm. One look at the urgent, and almost panicked expression on her face, brought him to a dead stop.

"Ginny?" he asked, "What's wrong?"

"Harry!" she squeezed his arm tightly, pulling him close so that she would not have to raise her voice to be heard. "I could hear what that snake was saying to you!"

He gently pried her fingers off his trapped arm, "Gin," he soothed, "I cast a translation spell on Nagini and I. Everyone could hear what we were--"

"No!" Ginny persisted, "Before! I could understand *before* you cast the spell! When it called your name and said that it came bearing a message."

Harry froze where he was standing, staring at her in amazement. Not to mention a horrible sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. An idea was forming in the darker recesses of Harry's mind, an idea that could explain this chilling revelation.

*'Um... are you guys thinking what I'm thinking?'*

***\*Could be.\****

***\*So tell us, Harry,\* prompted another, \*is this something drastic?\****

*'Could be.'*

\*\*\*

"Harry..." Dumbledore began, but trailed off as he noticed Ginny coming up to stand beside the raven haired Prefect. Obviously he had not been expecting her to be the one that accompanied Harry to their little discussion. Usually it was Ron or Hermione, or both, that acted as Harry's complementing bookends.

*'I really am a part of the group,'* she thought, a warmth rising within her, forcing back the alarm and worry coursing through her veins.

She watched Harry nod to Dumbledore, a concerned frown marring his features. Thinking about it, Ginny realized that Harry could often be seen frowning in such a manner. The full weight of the wizarding world seemed to rest on his shoulders sometimes. Most times. A swell of pride filled her at the thought that Harry had, as yet, always been equal to the task. He took whatever life, and Voldemort, threw at him... and weathered his way through it.

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He would be battered.

He would be beaten.

He would *never* be bowed.

"We'll discuss everything later tonight, sir," Harry assured the headmaster, "However something of greater importance has come to my attention. I need to see to that before anything else."

Dumbledore met Harry's gaze for a long few moments before glancing at Ginny and giving a nod of agreement, "Very well, Harry. I will trust your judgement in this matter."

"Thank you, Albus," Ginny heard Harry say, silently amazed, awed and horrified by Harry's use of Dumbledore's given name. Harry turned, about to leave with her in tow, when he stopped and added one last... it was far too firm to be a request. In fact, it almost sounded like an order.

"Oh, I almost forgot," he said, "Could you please inform the staff that Ginny might be late in getting to her lessons today? I'll try not to delay her too much, but I honestly don't know how long this will

take."

'Oh God,' her mouth was suddenly dry as her terror blossomed to the surface and began twisting her stomach in tight knots. *'It's as bad as I thought.'*

Harry looked at her, expressions of worry and concern battling to free themselves from his mask of cool collectedness. "Come on, Gin," he said, "We can continue this in the PFT auditorium." Ginny knew Harry was good at hiding his emotions, burying them inside him, but this time she was more worried than ever.

*'He seems so... worried doesn't seem a strong enough word, does it?'*

The journey from the Great Hall to the Practical Fighting Techniques auditorium was made in an uncomfortable silence. Ginny trailed behind Harry, who strode through the hallways of Hogwarts with grim determination. Only a few short minutes had passed since classes began when the pair finally arrived. Harry cut straight to the point, rounding on Ginny as they reached his desk, which was set off to one side of the large stage.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" he asked her, leaning against the nearby wall, indicating for her to take the desk's chair.

"My first year," Ginny agreed, sitting down, "The diary. But I'm not sure how."

Harry nodded solemnly. "Riddle left a part of himself in you. I doubt it was intentional."

The thought appalled Ginny, who sucked in a breath and wrapped her arms tightly around herself. Suddenly the room seemed much colder and a lot less safe, even with Harry only a few yards from where she was sitting.

"He put a part of him *inside* me?" she asked, feeling as if someone very big had just kicked her in the stomach with steel tipped boots.

"We should've expected this, actually. It really is the only way," Harry explained, "After all, until he was strong enough to leave the diary, he had to use you as a proxy. He had to imbue you with Parseltongue so that you could open the Chamber and control the Basilisk without him being there physically."

Ginny slipped off the chair and started crying, just as she had done three years ago, inside the Chamber of Secrets. In an instant Harry was at her side, drawing her into a tight embrace, his strong arms wrapped around her as he pulled her head against his chest.

"It's alright, Gin," he told her, rocking back and forth, "It's going to be alright."

Slowly her eyes dried up and the tears stopped winding down her cheeks. Ridiculously she found herself suffering from a sudden bout of hiccoughs. Harry smiled as she fought to hold down the soft, but incredibly embarrassing sounds. Still, she had to admit, this little embarrassment was a small price to pay. Having Harry holding her to him was definitely worth it.

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"I'm sorry," she whispered when the hiccoughs finally subsided, "It's just..."

"I know, Gin," he reassured her as he rubbed a hand in comforting, not to mention sensuous, circles on her back. "I've felt the same way."

Ginny looked up at him, her brown eyes glistening, "But I've got a part of *him* inside me!"

Reaching up to wipe away the trails left by her tears, Harry shushed her, "So do I."

"What?"

"When he tried to kill me, after killing my parents..." his voice trailed off and she saw his eyes lose their focus for a moment. She knew he desperately wanted a family, a proper family, not anything like the Dursleys, but until now she hadn't realized just how much the loss of his parents pained him.

"Harry..."

He looked back at her, smiling sadly, "I find it an even trade-off," he said, "I got the ability to speak with snakes; he got kicked out of his body for thirteen years."

"Oh, Harry," this time it was she who reached up to gently stroke his cheeks, thankful devoid of any tears. Harry didn't cry. Not because he was a boy, and she knew how stubborn they were about things like that. Not because he thought he was a hero, even though he was one. It was because, she sometimes thought, he simply didn't know how anymore.

"Gin," Harry tenderly took her hands in his, keeping his eyes locked firmly on hers, "I need you to be quiet for a moment."

Puzzled, Ginny cocked her head to one side and considered him. There was something in his eyes, something she had seen before. It was a look her older brothers, particularly Fred and George would exhibit, usually while planning one of their joking masterpieces. But this was different, this was devoid of the humour the twins bubbled over with.

"What're you going to do?" she asked.

He smiled wryly and actually chuckled before saying, "Looking up an old memory. If it's possible, I think I can help."

"How?"

"I don't know exactly," he confessed with a grin, "I'm pretty much making this up as I go."

\*\*\*

***\*Harry, have you fallen off your rocker? This is insane!\****

*'It'll work, won't it?'*

***\*Damned if we know.\****

***\*What you're asking... it's never been done before.\****

*'Rom and Rem. Unlike some of you, they're not echoes of the people close to whoever was holding the Order's power. They shared the power.'*

**\*Exactly! They shared it!\***

'Then why can't I do the same with Ginny?'

**\*Because, Harry, Romulus and I didn't share the power between us. The Order shared the power between us! We had nothing to do with it.\***

**\*The power the Order taps into... it's nearly infinite.\***

**\*If something goes wrong, you could crack the planet open like an eggshell.\***

'Then you'd better help me and make sure nothing goes wrong.'

**\*Harry, the Order has existed since before time began...\***

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**\*And will probably still be here after it ends.\***

**\*The point is, it's been around for a very, very, VERY, long time.\***

'So?'

**\*So when we say this has never been done, we mean, THIS HAS NEVER BEEN DONE!\***

'Then I'll be the first.'

**\*Why can't you just channel some energy into her? No need to risk everything when you can just siphon off a smidgen here and there.\***

**\*She has a point. The Order's power is practically limitless.\***

**\*You could give her more power than any witch alive and it wouldn't even put a dent in your energy reserves.\***

'This isn't about making her stronger. It's about helping her.'

**\*Doez not ze one follow on from ze ozzer?\***

**\*If you took a limited amount and transferred it to her, rather than attempt this link you're proposing...\***

**\*It does work. This we have done.\***

'Not an option. I will not settle for half measures when it comes to Ginny's well being.'

**\*You love her.\***

'I'm fifteen. How the hell should I know?'

**\*We're all much older than that. We know.\***

'Then you should understand. I have to do this for her.'

**\*Is she worth it?\***

'Worth dying for.'

**\*It may entail just that.\***

'Then I'll die happy.'

\*\*\*

Harry's eyes had lost their focus for a moment as he held Ginny. A second or so passed and then he was looking at her again, emerald eyes twinkling with anticipation. But it was not the kind of anticipation Ginny usually saw in Harry. It was not like the gleam he would get in his eyes just before a Quidditch match. It was not the mischievous sparkle present when he teased and played with the twins. It was not the anxious, eager glitter that came before the trip on the Hogwarts Express. No, this kind of anticipation Ginny had seen only once before, nearly three years ago.

Inside the Chamber of Secrets.

The anticipation of battle.

Harry smiled and pulled back from her, just a little, and gave her hands a gentle squeeze. "I think I have a way to help, but only if you want me to," he said, voice soft and low.

"Let's do it," she told him, eager to do whatever it took to get rid of Voldemort's presence within her. It was a feeling of violation that she had felt often in the days following the end of her first year. Months had passed before Ginny had managed to sleep straight through a night, uninterrupted by terrible dreams and memories. And now it was back, all of it, and anything, she felt, was worth burying that sensation once again.

"You might want to hear what it is first," Harry chided, still keeping a firm hold on her hands.

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"I trust you, Harry," she answered, peering intently into his eyes, determined to show that she was not afraid. Whatever it was he had planned, Ginny was committed to going through with it.

Harry smiled and lifted their hands so that they were level with their chests. He glanced down and then back up, peering back at her with a disturbing intensity. His thumbs were tracing soft circles over her palms, sending shivers up Ginny's spine as he matched her gaze.

"Don't worry," he assured her, "This won't hurt a bit."

And then Ginny's world exploded.

It was a fire that scorched and scalded her body and her mind, sheer blistering heat that turned everything it touched into powdery ashes.

It was ice creeping ever so slowly forwards, chilling through to the bone, colder than the very harshest winter and worse than anything sadness, grief and remorse could offer.

It was so soft, almost imperceptible, like the gentle touchdown of a butterfly, or the caress of a warm summer breeze playing with her hair.

It was the hard bluntness that made her bite her cheek when the twins hit at her with Bludgers during a family Quidditch match.

It was louder than the screams of accusation that haunted her dreams of Tom Riddle, louder than the cries of agony and terror she imagined Harry had heard.

It was silence, the vast emptiness that could be felt while sojourning into a graveyard during the ghosting hour after midnight.

It was the tender, fulfilling fantasy of Harry's soft and loving touch which made her feel alive as she had when the world was new and she was young.

It was a brutal rape, such as she had suffered emotionally under the control of a Dark Lord's memory, one she had been helpless to stop.

It was the isolated intensity of a bee sting, a needle, the lance of a sharp knife sliding over her flesh, leaving a line of red.

It was all encompassing, like being smothered in a warm blanket, or drenched in a shower of ice cold water, dumped from a bucket propped above a doorway.

It was the burning she felt on those nights, alone in bed, when her mind wandered to Harry and her hands and fingers wandered elsewhere.

It was pain.

It was love.

It was nothing and everything she had ever experienced.

It was incredible.

When Ginny finally came back, opening her eyes wide and sucking in a deep breath, she found herself off the floor and resting in the chair by Harry's desk. Harry was crouched down beside her, one hand on her shoulder, the other feeling for the pulse at her wrist. Her mouth was dry and it took several tries before she could speak.

"I thought you said it *wouldn't* hurt a bit?!"

"Oops."

"Oops?" Ginny could scarcely believe his words - word. 'Oops? That's all he has to say? Oops?' She looked up at Harry, who graced her with an apologetic shrug and then smiled happily.

"Welcome to the Order of the Phoenix."

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## 9. The Second Lesson

"Order of the Phoenix?"

Harry nodded as he sat on the edge of his desk, his eyes sparkling with triumph. Ginny was more than a little confused by what he had said. She had never heard of any Order of the Phoenix, and now she was already a member? Was Harry a member?

"Are you also member?" she asked, putting her thoughts into words.

"It would explain a lot if you think about, Gin," he told her, nodding again.

And, thinking about it, Ginny realized that it was true. Harry certainly had changed a great deal over the summer and being part of a secretive Order of the Phoenix would explain most of it. For a moment she had a horrible thought that suddenly being a member of this Order would entail her going through similar changes. The image of becoming a hulking, muscle-bound amazon was enough to make her teeth wiggle.

Then she looked at Harry and decided that fate was unlikely to befall her.

"But why didn't you tell us?" she asked, voicing the thought that overrode all others. She felt that Harry was her friend now, that he trusted her. He certainly had to; after all he had given her the full details concerning Sirius and all manner of other secrets.

*'Why not this one?'*

"That's the thing about secret Orders, Gin," Harry smiled playfully, "If you tell everyone about them, then they're not exactly a *secret* anymore are they?"

*'He does have a point,'* Ginny was reluctantly forced to admit.

*\*Of course he does.\**

Harry jumped up from his desk and offered her a hand, helping her to stand. With a hand on her elbow he guided her towards the centre of the stage. "Besides," he told her, "there's no way to conclusively prove the existence of the Order unless you're a member."

Ginny frowned trying to understand his meaning. "What do you mean?"

He smiled and stepped behind her, placing both hands on her shoulders. "Close your eyes," he whispered in her ear, his closeness sending shivers up and down her spine. Drawing a shaky breath Ginny did as Harry said and closed her eyes, trying not to tremble as his hands slipped down from her shoulders to her upper arms. "Now, feel it."

"Feel what?" she asked, focusing in on his voice.

"The world around you. Not the world you see and hear and feel every day, but the world beneath that. Where everything we are, everything we do, can be seen. Open your eyes."

And then Ginny's world exploded in a wash of colour, sound and feeling.

"Holy shit," she whispered in shock.

"I know the feeling," agreed Harry, coming around to stand in front of her.

He was encased in an aura of flaming red, white and gold, shining brightly in the subdued light of the auditorium. The flickering energy surrounded his body, giving off a soft, melodious note that she could both hear and feel throughout her body. It sounded like phoenix song.

All about the room Ginny could see the magic that was such an integral part of Hogwarts castle. She could just make out where some of the more talented students had been sitting the previous night. Here and there remained faint evidence of the teachers that had attended, the brightest of all being the traces where Dumbledore had sat during the presentation.

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The stage was a showcase of energy, telling the tale of the short demonstration Harry had staged.

Ginny followed the lines and waves left by Harry and his "volunteers" when they used their wands to

shoot spells about. Each spell was different in some way, be it the colour or the sound or the feel of the lingering signatures. It was like watching a ghostly re-enactment of the class, with faint glimmers of what happened telling the tale.

Thinking back Ginny located the places where she, alongside Ron and Hermione, had been sitting and tried to make out the remnants of their magic. Hers were soft red and orange wisps, next to the faint blue and purple shadows left by Ron and the gentle pink and emerald swirls surrounding where Hermione had been.

"Normally you won't be able to detect such faint traces, especially after nearly an entire day, however I placed a spell on the room that enhances magical signatures," Harry explained to her as he came over and stood by her side, "It'll make my teaching easier I hope."

"It's beautiful," she gasped, watching the trails winding their ways about the room, glimmering and glowing like some magnificent artwork, hidden away from the world where only she and Harry could see it.

Harry nodded, "That it is. Look down at your hands, before the effect fades."

Ginny glanced down at her hands and jerked in surprise. She could see her aura of magic, just as she could make out Harry's but it was different from what she had expected. Unlike the faint and slowly fading wisps of warm red and orange that remained where she had sat the previous night, her aura was instead blazing with vibrant red, gold and white - just like Harry's, and just as brightly.

"It only lasts a minute or so if you're not concentrating on it," he told her, "but that's long enough for you to identify any Order members. The aura is pretty much unmistakeable, like the Death Eaters." "Death Eaters?"

He nodded to one side, "Look where Snape was standing during the presentation."

Ginny looked and could make out the faint remnants left by the Potions Master. Despite herself, she shivered and quickly looked away, the faded traces of Snape's aura were as black as the very depths of nothing, highlighted with sickly green and midnight blues. Worst was how it seemed to writhe and play about like a living thing, filled with evil malevolence.

"Well..." she said after a moment to regain her composure, "At least we won't have any problems finding Voldemort's spies. You've checked for others?"

"Naturally," Harry agreed, "Fortunately the only spy we have to worry about at the moment is Snape, and he's on our side. Don't ask if that's a good thing or not."

Ginny nodded and looked about the room, where the signs of past magic were beginning to fade away as the spell wore off and her vision returned to normal. "So making me a member allowed you to take the piece Riddle left in me out?"

Harry shook his head and led her back to his desk, where Ginny was surprised to find plates of food waiting for them. She had been so preoccupied with the magic that she had failed to notice the houseelves delivering their... it looked like dinner.

*'It can't have been that long, could it?'*

"It's easy to put power into somebody," Harry explained as they sat down, but paused when he saw her incredulously look. He smiled apologetically and shrugged "Well, easier at least than taking that power out. The only person that can remove the pieces of Voldemort inside of us two is Voldemort."

"So... he's still inside me?" Ginny asked, the buoyant feeling inside deflating.

He sighed and grabbed a sandwich from a platter, "I'm afraid so."

"I don't understand," she shook her head, "Harry, what did you do?"

"There's a piece of Voldemort inside you, right?"

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"Right."

"Well, now there's a piece of me as well."

\*\*\*

Whatever Ginny had been expecting him to say, that was not it. He tried to hide a smile as she blinked and stared at him and then blinked again. She shook her head and continued to stare at him with a look of complete consternation on her face.

*'Yes, she was definitely not expecting that.'*

***\*Neither were we. Do you have any idea how much our heads hurt?\****

*'As I keep reminding all of you, you're dead - You don't have heads anymore!'*

"You... put a part of y-yourself in... in me?" asked Ginny after finally finding her voice.

Harry nodded and gave an apologetic shrug, "That's why it took so long. Making you a part of the Order only takes a few minutes, but I was channelling some of myself into you along with it."

Ginny shook her head again, "How long did it take?"

He took a bite from the sandwich he was holding, watching as Ginny piled some odds and ends onto her plate before answering, "Dinner started in the Great Hall fifteen minutes ago."

"You mean I was out for the entire day?!"

***\*Kind of like you were, when you tried your animagus transformation.\****

*'That was your fault.'*

***\*Ours? How did you come to that conclusion?\****

*'For one thing, you didn't tell me that trying to change would end up with me flat on my back, barely conscious for a whole day.'*

"Pretty much," he answered Ginny's question.

"We missed lunch."

"And breakfast was rather short as well," he agreed, "That's why I called Dobby in the kitchens while

you were recovering and he brought us this sumptuous feast that's laid out before you."

Ginny chewed a bite of food, absentmindedly tapping her fingers against the hard wood of Harry's desk while staring off into space. She was obviously assimilating everything that had happened to her over the course of the day. Harry sat quietly, watching her take it all in, wondering if she too had felt the searing pain he had when the Order had bonded itself to him.

*'But that was an act of necessity,' he thought to himself, 'this was... something else.'*

**\*What, exactly?\***

*'If you people are to be believed; love.'*

**\*You don't sound all that certain about it.\***

*'Love is something of a foreign concept for me, Isis. I mean, I know I love Ron and Hermione, and the rest of the Weasleys, but I don't think I've ever experienced the kind of love you're talking about. If this is love, it's the kind that cannot be described by mere words.'*

**\*That, Harry, is the best kind of love.\***

**\*And the most powerful.\***

He was snapped out of his musings as Ginny's eyes settled on him, their warm brown depths full with questions. Harry only hoped he could answer as many of them as possible. After all, he knew first hand what it felt like to have unanswered questions haunting him.

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"Don't think I'm complaining," she said, "In fact I find the idea rather... kinky, but how will having a piece of you inside me help?"

*'Kinky?'*

"I'm not really sure what the full effect will be," Harry admitted, "I've been told that nobody has ever tried something like this. I have a few ideas, theories, but nothing grounded in fact."

Harry stood up and began pacing back and forth, trying to gather his thoughts. Instructing his Practical Fighting Techniques class was easy compared to this. Of course, his first real class would not be starting for another hour or so.

"It's not just a matter of 'putting a piece of me' inside you," he said, stroking his chin with his hand as he paced. "I didn't just take a part of me and stick it in you."

*'This conversation could be taken so out of context.'*

**\*Oh, it is. Trust me, it is.\***

*'Shut up, Loki.'*

"I... bonded... a part of myself to you," Harry stopped pacing and looked at Ginny, trying to gauge her reaction, "What I gave you is no longer identifiable as having ever not been a part of you to begin with. It's like," he grasped for an adequate analogy, "It's like taking a sugar cube and putting it in a cup of tea. It will dissolve into the tea, you can taste it if you drink the tea but you can't physically see the cube anymore."

"It's a part of me, now," Ginny said, looking strangely pleased with the idea.

Harry nodded, "What Voldemort put in you is still separate, definable. If you strained the tea, you'd be able to see the part of him."

He watched as Ginny settled back into the chair, steepling her fingers in front of her as she once again paused to consider the situation. It wasn't a perfect solution, he knew, in fact it wasn't much of an imperfect solution either, but it was the best he could do. He hoped it was enough. He hoped she wouldn't condemn him for it.

"Harry?"

"Yes?"

Ginny smiled shyly and visibly fought a blush, but kept her soft eyes focused intently on Harry, "You were going to answer another question of mine before this all started."

*'Oh, yeah. I forgot about that in all the excitement.'*

**\*You're not old enough yet to start forgetting things like that.\***

"Indeed I was," he said, proud of the calm and confident tone his voice had. Truth be told, his mouth had suddenly gone dry and the bottom had fallen out of his stomach.

"And?" she pressed, "What's the answer?"

Trying not to lick his lips, Harry grinned back at her, "That depends."

"Depends? Depends on what?"

"On whether or not you say 'yes'."

\*\*\*

Hermione, along with Ron, the twins and a few of Harry's other friends, thought she had some idea of just what to expect for their first proper Practical Fighting Techniques lesson. After all, she reasoned, nobody knew Harry as well as she and Ron did. However, upon entering the auditorium a few minutes after dinner, she was forced to admit that all her ideas of what to expect had just been thrown out the window.

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Considering the PFT classroom had no windows, that was saying something.

At first glance it appeared very much as if Harry and Ginny, both of whom had vanished after the incident with Nagini that morning, were trying to kill each other.

At second glance it still seemed as though the pair were trying their damndest to eviscerate the other with the long, gleaming swords twirling about in their hands.

"Sweet Merlin," gasped Ron, "He pissed her off!"

Hermione swatted her friend on the arm and looked closely at the battling pair, aware all round her of the surprised gasps being made by the other students coming through the door. Surprisingly well over

half of those eligible for PFT had chosen to take the class. Now, they all stood just within the boundaries of the auditorium and watched as Ginny tore into Harry with all the force of a raging storm.

The petite redhead was easily a foot shorter than Harry and barely half his weight, but she was going after him with a grim determination that made Hermione wonder just what the hell Harry had done to, as Ron said, piss her off so.

The ringing clang of blade against blade filled the air as Ginny feinted and lunged with a fast one-two that Harry parried calmly and effortlessly. It was only now, as Hermione got closer to the stage where the pair were duelling, that she noticed the focused and intense expression on Ginny's face and the coolly evaluating look Harry was watching her with.

"They're sparring," she breathed, barely loud enough for those around her to hear.

Now that she mentioned it, the others could clearly see it too. Harry was for the most part just standing there, letting Ginny throw everything she had at him, while he deflected her blows with such consummate ease he almost seemed bored.

"You're dropping your left shoulder a bit," they heard him tell Ginny as he deftly blocked a series of slashes towards his face and chest.

Ginny growled and dropped into a low crouch, arcing her blade around in a swing that would have taken Harry's knees off had he still been there. Instead, the sword cleaved through empty air as Harry had leapt into the air the moment Ginny moved and performed an amazing feat of aerobics as he back flipped away and out of danger.

*'Holy shit,'* Hermione wondered, *'I didn't think anyone could do that.'*

He landed lightly on his feet five yards back from where he had been standing, his sword held protectively in front of him in his right hand. Somehow, during the back flip he had reached into his robes and pulled out his wand with his left hand. Hermione knew that Harry's right hand was his wandhand, but still he levelled his wand at Ginny and fired a curse with deadly accuracy.

Ginny barely ducked in time, rolling clumsily to one side and drawing her own wand with her free hand, shooting a curse of her own back as she came out of her roll. It missed Harry by nearly a full yard. He did not even flinch or acknowledge her counterattack, but started to slowly stalk towards her.

*'He must be using magic to enhance his physical abilities. That's very advanced magic, I wonder where he learnt it. Not to mention how he can seem so relaxed about it.'*

Realizing that she would not be able to curse or hex Harry while her wand was in her left hand, Ginny switched her wand and the sword about, but it was too late. Harry was already upon her and his sword sliced at her stomach. Ginny jumped back a foot, the tip of Harry's blade missing her abdomen by scarce inches. Now she found herself in the exact opposite situation to what she had just been, unable to effectively use her sword now that it was in her other hand.

"Good. Good," commented Harry as Ginny spun around, deftly switching the sword back to her right hand and coming out with a flurry of swift strokes. "But," he continued, pivoting on the ball of one foot and then the other, bringing himself behind her just as she made a wide slash that now missed him completely, "You're over extending yourself."

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He finished off his observation by giving Ginny a push between the shoulders with his free hand, causing the redhead to lose her balance stumble forward. To drive his point home, he slapped the flat edge of his sword against her butt.

"Ouch!" Ginny exclaimed, awkwardly spinning about to face him, hand reaching back to massage her posterior. She mock-glared at Harry and asked, "How did you get to be so good with a sword?"

"I'm curious about that myself," Hermione whispered to Ron, her eyes not leaving the stage.

Ron snorted softly, also watching the stage closely, "I'm curious about how *Ginny* suddenly got just as good."

Harry slipped his sword into a sheath attached to his belt and shrugged, "It pretty much happened overnight. It's like flying a broom; comes naturally."

"Sheer luck."

Everyone turned to look at the person who had spoken in a sneering drawl. Draco Malfoy, amidst the scarce few Slytherins that would be continuing with Practical Fighting Techniques, lounged in his seat, the sneer on his lip matching the one in his voice. Everyone glanced from the pale Slytherin boy to Harry, waiting to see what his reaction would be.

"Luck, Malfoy," lectured Harry, "is sometimes the most important asset a person can have."

\*\*\*

Ron watched as Harry silently made his way to the front of the stage, just before where the seats for the students started. His friend's attention was firmly fixed on Malfoy, who was sitting back and looking inappropriately smug.

*'Especially after Harry turned him into a ferret last night,'* thought Ron.

"He must be trying to make up for it," murmured Hermione beside him, causing Ron to realise that he had whispered his thoughts out loud.

"I hope Harry feels like giving a repeat performance," whispered Neville, standing behind the two of them, alongside the other Gryffindor fifth-years.

Reminded of Neville's presence in the PFT class, Ron took a moment to survey the other students present. Unsurprisingly most of the Gryffindors had decided to continue, including Neville which was somewhat unexpected. Even Lavender and Parvati were present, which Ron had been expecting even less than Neville's participation.

His brothers were there, claiming that they would not rest until Harry told them the secret to the transformation he had put them under. Already the twins were planning a line of sweets that turned the victim into 'puddy tat' saying Tweety birds. Joining them was their usual accomplice in crime, Lee, as well as the three Chasers from the Quidditch team. Even the diminutive Colin Creevey was present, camera in hand, meaning that every single Gryffindor from fourth to seventh year was there. Oddly enough, Ron realized as he looked across at the other houses, the six "volunteers" from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, were amongst those present. He had been expecting most of them to be too intimidated or petrified of Harry to continue. As it was, roughly half of both those houses had shown up, despite their reputations of Ravenclaw being bookworms and Hufflepuff being... well. He could see Cho Chang, alongside Roger Davies and Barbara Yeager, and there was Justin Finch-Fletchley, with Ernie MacMillan and Hannah Abbott.

Quite a mixed crowd altogether.

The Slytherins on the other hand were by far the least numerous of the houses, less than a full dozen students Ron counted. The only Slytherin fifth-years other than Malfoy were Millicent Bulstrode and Blaise Zabini. The rest were a motley crew of fourth and sixth years, with no seventh-years at all. Apparently being taught by not only a Gryffindor, but none other than The Boy Who Lived, was too large a bite for them to swallow.

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"Have you ever heard of Napoleon?"

Harry was standing where one of the aisles radiating out met the stage. There was a dangerous gleam in his eyes, made all the more evident for his recent lack of glasses. Ron, who counted himself Harry's closest friend along with Hermione, knew the look all too well. He had seen it often enough, usually right before Harry charged ahead to do something massively unwise.

Everyone's attention was on the two boys as Malfoy cautiously considered Harry's question before answering in a bored and disdainful manner. "He was the emperor of France a few centuries ago. Just a simple Muggle."

The dangerous gleam in Harry's eyes was growing brighter, Ron noted. "A simple Muggle with great ambition," he said, "Surely a *Slytherin* can appreciate such a trait."

"What's your point?" Malfoy seemed to be starting to realise that Harry was setting him up.

"There's a story about Napoleon," Harry explained, "Some officers of his were discussing the virtues of a young, up and coming soldier. Napoleon was only interested in one thing."

Malfoy tried to seem uninterested, "And what was that?"

"He wanted to know," Harry smiled wickedly, "'is he lucky?'"

"And was he?" the Slytherin's eyes narrowed. He knew now that Harry was setting him up, he just didn't know how. In the utter silence prevailing over the room as the two spoke, Ron had to admit he was curious about what Harry had in mind.

Harry smirked, the look of a kneazle that had cornered a mouse, "Napoleon certainly wasn't; look at Waterloo. What about you, Malfoy?"

The question seemed to unnerve the blonde, "What about me?"

With a flourish Harry had drawn his sword, twirling and sweeping it about in a display that drew squawks of alarm from those sitting in the first row. The light glittered on the keen blade as Harry held the weapon up for Malfoy to have a good look.

"This is a Japanese long-sword, a Katana, one of the finest blades in the world," as Harry spoke he began to slowly back to the centre of the stage, but always keeping his eyes on Malfoy, "It can cut your head clean off and not even notice the obstruction. So, tell me; do you feel lucky?"

"Ruddy hell," Ron heard Hermione mutter, "he thinks he's Dirty Harry."

Puzzled over why she was so suddenly interested in Harry's hygiene, Ron shook his head and gave her a whispered reply, "No, I'm sure he had a shower this morning."

Harry in the meanwhile had taken Ginny's sword in hand and was holding it out, pommel first, to Malfoy, "Well, do you? If you do, come on down and take this sword." His eyes narrowed and his voice was practically dripping contempt, "We'll see if your luck is better than Ginny's."

"Oooh," breathed George, looking as though Christmas had come early, "Harry's baiting him."

"I had planned to devote this lesson to evaluating you all," Harry announced, glancing over all the waiting students, "But now I think an impromptu lesson in the art of sword fighting would be appropriate enough instruction. After all, it always pays to be able to handle a blade, whether it's for a duel..." his eyes turned back to Malfoy, "or knife in the back."

A faint flush of pink burned Malfoy's cheeks as he hastily pulled himself out of his seat and began to make his way down onto the stage. His lips were drawn into a thin line and Ron could actually hear his teeth grinding as he walked passed.

"The Malfoys are an old, and influential family," he drawled, stepping out onto the stage, "Of course my father has formally tutored me in the art of sword fighting."

"Malfoy's having an ego trip, again," Hermione observed dryly.

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"How can you tell?" retorted Ron, earning stifled guffaws from his brothers and all those sitting around them.

Malfoy was now standing only a couple of yards from Harry, hands crossed over his narrow chest and the customary sneer in full evidence. Harry smiled at the Slytherin's posturing and lightly tossed the weapon in his hand to the other boy. Malfoy nimbly caught the blade in midair, but almost immediately the weight of the sword caused his arm to be jerked downward, almost losing his hold on

the grip.

He could only just make out Malfoy's expression, but Ron could tell that the blonde was surprised by the weapons weight. He stared down at the sword, his mouth dropping open, before he looked up and gaped at Ginny in disbelief. Obviously he must have thought Ron's sister had been using a light, feminine sword. With visible effort Malfoy raised the sword into a fighting position, his arm trembling under the strain of holding the weapon up.

"You aren't using a practice sword," noted Malfoy with a quiver in his voice as Harry, casually and with almost indecent ease, drew his gleaming blade in a wide arc and into a ready position.

Harry's wolfish smile made even the twins shiver, "I'm not practicing."

\*\*\*

Ginny Weasley had never before felt sorry for Draco Malfoy, but during the course of the second Practical Fighting Techniques class, she was sorely tempted. The pale haired Slytherin, who made it his mission in life to insult her family and friends, had been so hopelessly out matched it was all Ginny could do not to burst out laughing.

*'Oh, this should be fun,' she thought, 'Harry versus Malfoy in a sword fight.'*

*\*S going to be like watching a cerberus going after a mouse.\**

*'Harry saw one of those in his first year, Ron told me about it,' she replied to the whisper, one of the soft voices that had coached her earlier.*

To start off with problems Malfoy was experiencing, his sword was far too heavy. As Harry tossed the blade to him, Ginny had caught him casting a bit of wandless magic. He didn't say anything, but it looked like a special charm that more than doubled the apparent weight of the object it was cast on. The only reason Ginny knew Harry had done anything was the Order's power, which allowed her to perceive magic as it was cast.

"I'm not practicing," she heard Harry tell Malfoy and enjoyed watching as the blood drained from the other boy's already pale face.

It took several moments, during which time Ginny found a seat with the Gryffindors, but finally

Malfoy recovered and sneered tauntingly at Harry, "Good, because neither am I!"

After that the duel began and was such a one sided affair that it was actually comedic. Malfoy spent nearly ten minutes doggedly attacking Harry, throwing himself behind his swings, slashes and thrusts with nearly maniacal determination. In hilarious counterpoint, Harry had circled around the stage, allowing Malfoy to pursue him, blocking, deflecting and avoiding the attacks, often without even watching to see what his opponent was doing.

Malfoy jabbed at Harry's face, but it was only a feint, a moment later his sword was slashing down at Harry's thigh. With a deft downward swipe and a twist, Harry diverted the blow to one side and almost caused Malfoy to topple over.

He did not press his advantage however, but merely rested the blade on his shoulder and calmly waited for Malfoy to recover. Malfoy staggered some, but remained upright, throwing his weight towards Harry behind a swinging backhand.

Harry met the blow with one of his own and spiralled Malfoy's sword and arm about in a wide circle, leaving his opponents body open and exposed. His right leg snapped up, knee high and his foot shot out, landing a powerful side kick to Malfoy's chest.

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"Far too predictable, Malfoy," Harry noted, not moving from where he stood as the other boy struggled to stay on his feet as he was knocked backward.

Harry had actually spent most of this first stage calmly lecturing the watching students on the virtues of different types of swords, fighting styles and techniques. His knowledge, the sheer breadth and depth of it, seemed impossibly vast. Finally he stopped Malfoy's persistent, yet fruitless, attempts to skewer him.

"Apparently the right, honourable, Lucius Malfoy neglected to teach Draco here how to fight an opponent straight up," observed Harry, "I'd offer to turn around and expose my back, but somehow I doubt that would improve his chances any great degree."

With an inarticulate roar Malfoy threw aside any form or reason and simply charged straight at Harry, clearly intent on trying to skewer Harry on his sword, which he held out in front of him like a spear.

But Harry stepped to one side at the last instant, reaching up with his free hand to cup the back of Malfoy's head and give a shove. It was enough to off-balance the Slytherin, causing him to stumble over his own feet and fall flat on his face.

"Over extending yourself is a dangerous thing to do," Harry mentioned, calm as could be, "Any experience opponent can easily take advantage of it."

As Malfoy pushed himself to his feet and whirled to face Harry once again, Harry looked up to where Ginny was now sitting and winked, "Perhaps, since Malfoy's offensive technique is clearly flawed, he will be kind enough to demonstrate his defensive technique. If any."

Malfoy froze where he was standing, sword held shakily in both trembling hands as Harry's words slowly sank in. When the realization finally hit him the blood once again drained from his face and his mouth opened to try and protest, but it was too late. Harry proceeded, over the course of another ten minutes, to put Malfoy in the hospital wing under the dubious care of Madam Pomfrey.

Even after only a few strokes it was obvious that Malfoy was about to take a licking, but after Harry turned his attack up a few notches, it was frightening. His katana flicked out and back, cutting Malfoy's robes before the Slytherin could even begin to react. By the end of the first minute Harry was moving so fast his movements could not be easily followed.

Harry's sword licked out like a striking serpent and suddenly there was a thin red line across Malfoy's cheek. Harry spun about, his blade whipping through the air and there was a matching line on his other cheek.

Within a very short time Malfoy was looking much the worse for wear, dozens of tiny nicks and cuts covering his face, body and limbs. His robes hung from his lithe frame like rags, he was barely able to hold his sword up and was swaying heavily on his feet. Like an ancient oak tree being cut down the Slytherin dropped to his knees, the sword falling from his numb hands. His breathing was ragged and all he could do was shake his head as he collapsed bonelessly to the stage floor.

"Money. Power. Fame," Harry bent down and stared into Malfoy's panicking eyes, "None of them are worth jack shit when your balls are on the butchers block."

Smirking, Harry reached into his robes and withdrew a small stone, about the size of a Snitch. Holding it in his hand Harry muttered under his breath and then pressed it into one of Malfoy's hands before standing up and sketching a mock salute to the prone boy.

"See you in the morning, Malfoy."

With a swish of displaced air Malfoy's figure swirled about and vanished into thin air with a faint pop.

"That was a specially designed portkey," Harry explained, moving to the stage centre, where the lecturing podium had risen up, "In the unlikely event of any of you sustaining a serious injury, we have a plentiful supply on hand. They will transport you directly to the infirmary, where Madam Pomfrey will be waiting."

"Now, as I was saying before I was interrupted..."

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## 10. The Elections Were Rigged

"I still can't believe you did that to Malfoy," Hermione told Harry several weeks later, something of a repeated proclamation.

It was now the last week of September and the entire group of fourth to seventh year Gryffindors were heading back to the common room after that evenings PFT class. It had taken a couple of weeks but the rest of the school had finally come to terms with the fact that Harry was now the most dangerous wizard any of them knew. Even more so than Voldemort since, despite Dumbledore's repeated cautions, very few people were fully convinced of the dark lord's return.

"Mione," complained Ron, "Don't ruin the memory."

"Yeah," agreed Seamus, "Only thing that could've been better would have been another appearance by the Amazing Bouncing Ferret."

Harry smiled at Ginny, who was walking beside him, between Hermione and him, "I didn't put him through anything he didn't deserve."

True enough, Ginny silently agreed. After coming close to being skinned alive by Harry, Malfoy had been avoiding the Gryffindors ever since he left the hospital wing. Unfortunately this did not extend to avoiding the nightly PFT classes, which he continued to attend.

"You turned him into a pincushion!" crowed Colin Creevey from behind them.

"No I didn't!" protested Harry, good naturedly, "To turn him into a pincushion I would've had to jab at him with the sword a few times. I did not stick my sword into Malfoy."

The moment the words left his mouth Ginny heard his jaw snap shut as a mischievous silence descended over the group. Fred and George were both grinning broadly and evilly at Harry, rubbing their hands in devilish anticipation as they chortled knowingly.

"One word, either of you," cautioned Harry, "And I'll be bringing the katana out tomorrow night for a demonstration on fighting two opponents at the same time. You two will be the volunteers."

"Aw, you never let us have any fun," pouted George as Fred crossed his arms.

"And for good reason," affirmed Ginny, glaring at her brothers in a manner similar to that used by her mother on occasion, "Besides... Malfoy? Ewww."

From behind them a voice piped up, drawing their attention back to Jefferson Hope, a stocky fourthyear boy. He currently had an arm around Colin's shoulders and the other around Neville's, hobbling his way after the rest of the group with a slightly strained ankle. At any other point in Hogwarts history he would have been off to the infirmary to see to his injury, but injuries of this sort had become so commonplace during PFT that after the first week of being inundated by patients, Madam Pomfrey had tossed her toys out of her cot and laid down a list of injuries she would not treat immediately.

"Basically," she had put it, "If you're not bleeding, you're not getting in until morning!"

The students had been dismayed, but were even more so when Harry agreed wholeheartedly with her, albeit for completely different reasons. Apparently he thought the lack of immediate healing would be good motivation for his pupils to put more effort into their work in order to avoid spending an uncomfortable night waiting for Madam Pomfrey's ministrations the next morning.

Not that it helped all that much as Harry certainly kept to his promise. His classes were brutal enough that half a dozen Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws stopped attending the first week. Since then the number of drop outs had declined and it had been nearly a week since they lost anyone. Still, every student taking PFT had visited the infirmary, including Ron and Hermione. The only person to have escaped a night incarceration with Madam Pomfrey had been Ginny, though nobody could claim Harry went easy on her in any way. Harry had no favourites, unlike Professor Snape, and pushed everyone to their limits.

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"Madam Pomfrey counted a hundred cuts on him!" declared Jefferson, wobbling between Colin and Neville as they helped him along.

"Two hundred, I heard," put in Colin, beaming at Harry in admiration.

Harry chuckled and explained, "It was the Slytherin in me."

Ginny snorted in scornful disbelief, "I don't believe there's a single truly Slytherin bone in your body."

"Don't be too sure, Gin," Harry replied, "Don't be too sure."

*\*Quite true,\** whispered a soft voice in the recesses of Ginny's mind, *\*That boy is very devious when the occasion calls for it.\**

Ginny had to agree with this unusually detached thought. She seemed to be having a lot of them, ever since Harry had imparted some of his essence into her. For the most part she ignored these half-heard whispers, taking them as some sort of side effect from the process, only one not as useful as the others she was discovering.

Just as Riddle had left her with the ability to speak and understand Parseltongue, so had Harry left her with a variety of new talents. An astonishingly wide variety to tell the truth.

Ginny had not really noticed it at first, with the exception of the mind-boggling sword fighting display she and Harry had engaged in that first night. It had started innocently enough with him offering to give her a few pointers, after she had noticed the swords resting in a small cabinet to one side of his desk. After that, things had rapidly progressed to the point where the other students attending the class had arrived and well... the entire school knew what happened next.

PFT's first and, thus far, only sword fighting lesson.

But that was only the beginning however. Since then, over the past few weeks, Ginny had found herself performing remarkably well in all her subjects, particularly DADA. She still cringed at the memory of when she had accidentally blown Professor Lupin across his classroom, rendering him unconscious and bedridden in the infirmary for the remainder of the day. He was surprisingly cheerful and understanding about the incident, although no longer took to asking Ginny to help demonstrate in front of the class.

She was also finding Transfiguration and Charms increasingly easy and had taken to spending her time in those classes helping her classmates, since she invariably finished any exercises laid out before the rest. As with DADA there had been one or two minor accidents, most notably the occasion when Ginny was supposed to animate a small - it fit in her hand - statue of a griffin. Instead of simply animating the statue she had accomplished somewhat more, actually changing the statue into a real, live griffin which then proceeded to wreck the classroom. Filch had grumbled for days and still glared at her when he saw her.

The whole thing caused Ginny to pause and wonder occasionally. If having only a part of Harry inside her was doing this, just how powerful was Harry?

The other changes, mostly physical ones, were more subtle and Ginny attributed them to her now being a member of the still mysterious Order of the Phoenix. Despite the fact that she was part of the Order, she knew disturbingly little about it.

She could not be entirely sure, having nothing to measure against, but Ginny thought she had grown perhaps an inch or two since that night. It could have been the Order or simply one of those "growth spurts" she had heard about. She could clearly see, when dressing before a mirror in the mornings, the satisfying increases in her muscle tone and definition. Ginny took after her father, being tall and slender, as did Ron, Percy and Bill, but in the past month she had filled out in just the right places to give her a curvaceous, yet athletic figure.

Everyone had noticed, particularly her brothers. Aware of the looks their baby sister was drawing from the rest of the male population, Fred, George and Ron had taken to patrolling about her like soldiers guarding a precious jewel. The only person, the only boy, they seemed willing to leave her alone with for any period of time was Harry.

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*'If only they knew,'* she mused, smiling to herself as the group reached the portrait of the Fat Lady, diligently guarding the entrance to Gryffindor Tower. Ginny and Harry flirted outrageously when they were alone and often continued even when in the presence of others, although in a somewhat more subdued tone. Harry it seemed loved to lace his words with double meanings, a habit that Ginny found herself beginning to emulate.

It was Neville that strode forward eager to show his housemates that, for once, he remembered the password, "Finis Coronat Opus!"

The Fat Lady arched an eyebrow and shook her head mournfully. Neville stared at her for a moment, waiting, and then turned to the rest of the Gryffindors.

"Why isn't she opening?"

Harry sighed, "Today was Monday, Neville," he told the puzzled boy. "The password's changed, remember? We're using the one I posted up this morning, not Hermione's one from last week."

Neville snapped his fingers and covered his eyes with the other hand, "Bugger."

Everyone exchanged amused looks. Neville was famous for forgetting the password into the common room, but this was the first time anyone could recall him cursing about it. He was simply too mild mannered to use explicit language and even such a mild cuss seemed odd, yet amusing, when uttered by the usually soft spoken boy.

"Imperial Arch Griffin," Harry told the Fat Lady after a moment, giving the new password he had set that morning. Gracing them with a smile and a wave to bid them entry, the portrait swung open and one after the other the Gryffindors pulled themselves into the common room.

"Oi, Harry!" called Fred as Harry, along with Ron and the other fifth year boys started up the stairs to their dormitory, "Hang on a minute, please. We've something of an announcement to make. Everyone

else might want to stick around and hear it too."

Ginny watched, wondering what was up, as Harry turned to find himself confronted by the twins and Gryffindor's three Chasers, Alicia, Angelina and Katie. The five seventh-years stood in the centre of the common room with serious expressions on their faces as Harry made his way down the few steps he had climbed and walked towards them.

"As you are all no doubt aware," announced George, stepping up to stand at Harry's right side, whilst Fred moved to stand at Harry's left.

"Young Harry, here," continued Fred, "is the star Seeker of our Quidditch team-"

"Has been for five years now-"

"Counting last year-"

"Even though there wasn't any Quidditch to speak of-"

"And, as most of you are aware, our delightful, if maniacal, captain-"

"Oliver Wood, has since graduated-"

"And gone onto greater, if less exciting, things-"

"Which leaves us with something of a dilemma-"

"One that we have, fortunately enough, been able to solve-"

"And so it is with great pleasure-"

"And a trifle amount of trepidation-"

"That we are pleased to announce-"

"The selection of Gryffindor's new Quidditch captain-"

"Harry James Potter!" concluded George, with a bow and flourish.

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The common room was swept up in a wave of cheers as the Gryffindors cheered their new captain on his appointment. Harry was quickly engulfed by Ron, Hermione and then Ginny, as others came up to offer congratulations with either a handshake, a clap on the back or, in the case of most of the girls, a kiss. Suffice to say by the end of it all, both Harry and Ginny were both quite red in the face, although for completely different reasons.

'What do they think they're doing?' Ginny all but growled, scowling fiercely at the girls who had graced Harry with kisses. For a moment her mind was awash with images of turning Lavender and Parvati into Amazing Bouncing Peacocks, but she clamped down on this urge, took a deep breath and tried to relax about it.

*"My girl,"* spoke a soothing whisper, *"You need to calm down. You're getting as excitable as that brother of yours."*

Truth be told, Ron wasn't looking that excited about Harry's appointment as the new Quidditch captain. His smile seemed a bit forced and his eyes seemed to hold a trace of disappointment in them as he backed away from his overwhelmed friend to stand next to Hermione.

Finally freed from the grasps of his well-wishers, Harry turned to the other five members of the Quidditch team. "When did you lot decide this?" he asked, clearly stunned by their decision.

"Yesterday," answered Fred, "The whole team took a vote and it was unanimous. Seven votes for Harry Potter."

"Seven? Wood's graduated, so it's only the six of us and I don't remember casting a ballot, so there should only be five votes."

"Actually," admitted Katie, "We owed Oliver and asked him for his recommendation. You were it."

George nodded vigorously, "Plus, as our resident expert in strategy and what not, you have to admit you're the one best suited for the job. There's no rule that says you can't vote for yourself, so we did it for you."

Harry looked from George to Fred to Alicia to Katie to Angelina and then back to George, eyes wide and mouth hanging open in disbelief.

"You are nuts. Absolutely bonkers."

"Maybe," agreed George, "But we're definitely going to win the Quidditch Cup if you say yes."

Harry shot his teammates an incredulous glance, shook his head and laughed silently before he gave a consenting nod, "Okay. Practice starts tomorrow morning at five."

"WHAT?!?"

\*\*\*

Harry sat upon his Firebolt, hovering a hundred feet above the centre of the Quidditch pitch, watching as the early morning sunlight gleamed off the light frost coating the ground. It was the first Saturday of October, the day when the rest of Gryffindor would get their chances to show Harry, and the rest of the Quidditch team, what they were capable of.

He had been up since just before sunrise, as was his usual habit these days, and had spent the time flying on his broom. It had been a long time since Harry had had a chance to stretch his proverbial wings and he found the experience even more enjoyable because of it. After nearly two hours of dives, rolls and any other manoeuvres he could think of Harry had settled down and flown lazily about, just enjoying the sensations.

Up here, in the air, he felt so free and unburdened by worries. A far cry from when he was still on the ground. Everything was that much simpler when he was flying.

***\*You really need to tell someone about these nightmares of yours, Harry.\****

'What nightmares?' he asked evasively.

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***\*Harry, we may not be able to see into your dreams,\**** admitted Alex, ***\*but we know you're having trouble sleeping.\****

*\*Two hours a night. Even with the Order's power sustaining you...\**

*'I'm just restless that's all.'*

*\*You wake up every time in a cold sweat.\**

*\*We know zese nightmares 'ave nothing to do wiz Voldemort,\* elaborated Joan. \*We would know if your scar waz 'urting you, zo we figure zey must be about somezing else...\**

*'Drop it.'*

*\*Harry...\**

*'Drop it!'*

Harry had just spotted the bulk of Gryffindor house coming out onto the pitch, replete after a doubtless hearty breakfast. Looking at the crowd he could make out the red hair of Ron and Ginny, with Hermione's mousy brown bush beside them. Ron, who was planning on trying out for a position on the team, had his Comet 260 in hand. But the real surprise was that Ginny was trudging along with her old Cleansweep Five slung carelessly over her shoulders.

Spotting the other five members of the team exiting the locker rooms, in their red Quidditch robes, Harry began to descend. He spiralled down to where everyone was waiting, jumping off his broom while still ten feet up to land lightly on his feet. His broom cruised to a halt beside him, hovering rock steady at waist height.

"All right," he announced loud enough for everyone to hear him, "If you're not trying out can you please go and sit in the stands? I'd like only people who want to be on the team on the pitch."

The crowd of Gryffindors quickly dispersed into the stands, taking seats or standing around in small groups. Harry was alarmed to note that most of the huddles were comprised of various girls who seemed to be eyeing him closely and giggling an inordinate amount. It was his own fault, he realized. Since it was the weekend he had forgone the usual Hogwarts robes and had neglected to wear his Quidditch robes and was dressed in only jeans and a tight black, sleeveless vest.

*\*No wonder the ladies are looking you over.\**

*'Isis...'*

*\*Admit it Harry, you're a hottie.\**

Harry looked at the remaining twenty or so people, all with brooms in hand. In the front were Ron and Ginny, both looking very eager to begin. Although Ginny did seem perfectly happy where she was, watching him with slightly glazed eyes and a faint flush to her cheeks.

*\*And Virginia there definitely seems appreciative...\**

"You're trying out for the team?" he asked her, motioning at the broom resting on her shoulders.

"What position?"

Ginny grinned at him, "Chaser."

"Chaser?" Harry looked her over with an appraising eye before nodding, "I can see you as one, you have the right build. I think you'll do well."

"Of course I will. I chased *you* for four years, didn't I?"

By now the rest of the Quidditch team had arrived, leaving Harry with no time to reply, settling instead for a grin and a wink before joining his teammates.

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"All right, listen up," he caught their attention, "As you all know, we're in desperate need of a Keeper this year, since Wood graduated. Therefore finding a replacement is our top priority. However, as you should also know, this is the last year for the rest of the team. Which means that next year we'll be needed a full set of new Chasers and Beaters."

Alicia and Katie were nodding solemnly, Angelina was scuffing the grass with her foot and the twins were being themselves.

"Alas!" bemoaned George theatrically, "Our time here is nearly at an end!"

"So much to do," continued Fred, "So little time to do it in-"

"So many pranks that will never reach fruition-"

"Hold me!"

The pair grabbed each other in a tight hug and began wailing their heads off like professional mourners at a funeral. Nobody knew whether to laugh or groan at their antics.

"As you can see they will not be sorely missed," observed Harry dryly, earning gasps of outrage and a general waving of fists in his direction by the twins.

"To this end," he picked up, "I have decided, after consulting with the rest of the team and Professor McGonagall, that we shall be selecting a full reserve team this year. You will train with the principal team and, if possible, even play in one or two games during the year."

"Which games?" piped up a voice from the rear.

Harry tried not to roll his eyes as he saw Colin waving his hand in the air. "Definitely not any games against Slytherin," he said. "I refuse to let those sods beat us in anything, especially since I've heard from McGonagall that Malfoy's managed to buy his place as their new captain."

Disgruntled mutterings began in the prospectives and behind him Harry could hear the rest of the team cursing to various degrees, particularly the twins. They all remembered how Malfoy's father had bought Draco's way onto the team during Harry's second year. It seemed nothing had changed since then, which Harry considered a minor comfort.

"I'll play the reserves in matches against Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. You'll only get a chance against Slytherin if you make Keeper or if someone can't play because of an injury. Understood?"

There were nods all-round, some slightly grudging but soon everyone was paying attention as Harry began explaining how things would be worked. He dispatched all those trying out as a Chaser to the other end of the pitch, where they would be flying in groups of three and trying to score against Fred,

who would be acting as Keeper, while George kept track of who scored what. Everyone else, trying for Keeper, remained and were sent up one by one to protect the goals from the combined efforts of Alicia, Angelina and Katie. Each candidate faced twenty attempts by the girls before coming down, Harry watching closely and keeping score. Those that wanted to try out for a position as Chaser as well, were then directed to the opposite goals. Only two people were trying out for the position of reserve Seeker, a pair that gave Harry cause to gaze heavenward. Somehow though, he could not bring himself to be surprised at this latest demonstration of hero worship. Colin and Dennis Creevey had not changed in the slightest over the summer, except perhaps that they were now each a couple of inches taller. After setting the pair of them off chasing after a Snitch, he shook his head.

"I must have been a real Genghis Kahn in a previous life," he muttered.

"What makes you say that?" asked a soft female voice to his side.

Without looking up, but wondering who it was - he didn't recognise the voice right away, Harry answered, "It's the only reason I can think of that explains my bad karma."

Whoever it was chuckled softly, "They're not *that* bad. Are they?"

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Harry glanced up and froze.

*'Oh no.'*

It was Cho Chang.

"Hi Harry," she greeted him, "I've been wanting to talk to you."

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"Actually," Harry said, "I've been trying to avoid that."

Sirius watched as his godson tensed up like a cornered animal, deliberately avoiding the gaze of the girl standing at his side.

"I know," she told him, "That's one of the things I want to talk about."

Sirius was amazed by Harry. The boy had shot up in height nearly a foot since he had last seen him, under the care of Madam Pomfrey in the hospital wing, and had filled out considerably as well. Now, more so than ever, he was practically the spitting image of James at that age, with only the absence of his once ever-present glasses to tell the difference.

The only reason Sirius had found the boy in the crowd had been his scent. As it was he had not believed his eyes when he first saw him. It was only when he heard Harry speak, much deeper than before and sounding just like James, that it was driven home. Softly he padded towards where the two children were standing, watching as Harry considered the petite witch standing next to him.

"I've been... busy, Cho," Harry responded, his eyes fixed firmly upon the Quidditch pitch.

"I don't blame you for Cedric's death, if that's what you're worried about."

Harry's hand jerked violently and slashed a line of ink across the parchment he was writing on. Before he could do or say anything the girl, Cho, reached up and gently placed a hand on Harry's shoulder.

"I can see that's what you're thinking every time you look at my, Harry."

"You must be mistaken," he assured her, continuing to concentrate on the Quidditch.

Cho pulled on his shoulder and forced Harry to turn and face her, looking all the world like a man condemned to the gallows. Sirius tensed as faint scowl marred her exotic features, but relaxed as she began to lecture the boy towering above her.

"Dammit, Harry, it's not your fault!"

"Of course it's my fault!" he snapped, jerking away from her, "I caused his death. I practically killed him myself because I was too stupid."

"To do what? Huh?" Cho interrupted. "How's it your fault, tell me. For sharing the glory? For not taking advantage of Cedric's sense of nobility? For being honourable to a fault? For being the bleeding textbook definition of what it means to be a Gryffindor? Tell me, how is it your fault?"

Sirius watched as Harry trembled slightly, his hand clenching tight and crumpling the parchment he was holding. More than anything right then he wanted to be able to take his godson in his arms and try to give him the comfort and assurances that he needed. Not possible while so many young witches and wizards were standing around, but Sirius had sent over a decade in Azkaban. Patience did not come naturally to him, but he had learnt how to fake it well enough.

*'Oh, Harry... why do you insist on shouldering the responsibility for everything that happens to you, even the things that you cannot control?'*

With a heart-wrenching sigh Harry dropped his head and studied his shoes, "I should have known. It was too good to be true. I knew somebody was setting me up. I knew that just being around me was putting him in danger. I should have expected it."

"Expected it?" repeated Cho, incredulously, "For Circe's sake, Harry, Dumbledore didn't even expect something like *that* to happen! And he's the smartest damned wizard on the planet!"

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Harry look up, shaking his head, "I should have been able to save him."

At this Sirius decided it was time to make his presence known, not necessarily as a human felon, but as Snuffles the oversized dog. Best to distract Harry from the uncomfortably memories this Cho girl was bring back to the surface. He moved close to where they were standing and barked a couple of times.

"If only Trelawney were here," observed Harry, "I might finally be rid of her."

"Oh my! A grim!" Cho brought her hands up to her face and backed away, almost bumping into Harry. Harry snorted and quirked an eyebrow at Sirius, "No. It's actually my mass murdering, escaped convict of a godfather in disguise." His delivery held such a sarcastic tone Sirius knew that Cho would

not for a moment consider the fact that it was true.

Harry walked up to Sirius and dropped down onto one knee, ruffling the thick fur on Sirius' head as he spoke in a hushed voice, "Hey boy. I wasn't expecting to see you here."

Sirius panted happily and gave a soft bark, grinning happily up at Harry as best he could while being a dog. Harry chuckled and continued ruffling his fur, looking over his shoulder at Cho, who had drawn her wand and was fingering it nervously. "His name's Snuffles," he told her, indicating to her to put the wand away as it was not needed, "He's a stray from Hogsmeade. Lives around the Shrieking Shack, I think."

Cho crouched down beside Harry and tentatively reached out a hand towards Sirius. He gave it a cursory sniff and a slobbering lick before looking into her eyes and panting happily. Wiping her hand against her robes to remove the drool Cho looked wryly over at Harry who was grinning and now simply resting his hand on Sirius' coat.

"Affectionate sort, isn't he?" she asked him.

Harry laughed and nodded, "Be careful though. He may seem charming, but he's got a wicked streak of mischief in him. Make the twins seem almost amateurish by comparison."

Cho laughed as well, giving Sirius a friendly pat, and then stood, "I guess I'd better leave you to finish your tryouts for a new Keeper."

Harry rose to his feet and nodded solemnly at her, "Yes, I don't think it would be appropriate for the Ravenclaw captain to be present. Congratulations on that, by the way."

"Thanks. I hear you're captain as well."

Sirius perked his ears and looked at Harry, beaming up at his godson. He had stopped by Hogwarts before coming to the Quidditch pitch in search of Harry. Remus, with whom he had spoke, had not said anything about Harry being chosen as the Gryffindor captain.

"Thank you," Harry seemed to have drawn a shroud of forced formality over himself, pushing Cho away from him on an emotional level. "I'm... glad... we talked."

"So am I, Harry," she agreed, half turning to leave. She looked at him before going on her way,

"Maybe we can do it again sometime."

Harry nodded silently and both he and Sirius watched as Cho left the stands and strode briskly back to the castle. Glancing around to make sure nobody was close enough to hear them, Harry looked down at Sirius, "I presume you heard most of that?"

Sirius whined softly and pawed at Harry's thigh. The boy shook his head and then motioned back towards the stands, "Let's sit. It looks like the girls are ready to start shooting at the new Keepers. You can tell me what you think."

Nodding once in agreement Sirius bounded up and lay down in the front row, pawing at his side to show Harry where to sit. His godson chuckled and dropped down beside him, unscrunching the piece of parchment in his hand and casting a quick dewrinkling charm to straighten it out. Quill in hand he and Sirius sat back and watched the trials taking place before and above them.

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First up was a boy Harry identified as a fourth-year named Jefferson Hope, who managed to fend off roughly half of the shots the Chasers made on goal. He was followed by a third-year girl, Harry identified her for Sirius as Lucy Ferrier. She was very fluid in her motions Sirius saw, but hesitant and unfortunately also rather small in size, unable to stop some of the harder shots because of it. Lucy managed to save roughly a third of the shots taken before descending, this time replaced by a figure Sirius did not need Harry to identify.

"Hmmm. He's pretty good," noted Harry, jotting down his observations besides Ron's name on the parchment, "But he simply doesn't look comfortable in the position. Personally I think he'd be a better Chaser than a Keeper."

Sirius rumbled his agreement as Harry sighed, "I know he's trying out for both, but he really wants a place on the team *this* year. I just know he's going to get wound up if he doesn't make it."

Ron managed to save sixteen of the twenty shots taken and descended to the earth, receiving a smattering of applause from the spectating Gryffindors. Hermione, Sirius saw with some amusement, seemed particularly enthusiastic and was almost bouncing where she stood.

"Yeah," agreed Harry, seeing where Sirius was looking, "I think they're finally starting to get it figured out that they like each other."

Sirius chuckled, *'They'll either end up marrying or killing each other.'*

As Ron ran passed them, hurrying to the other end of the pitch to take his turn for the position of Chaser, he waved happily at Harry. He waved back, and Sirius gave a loud bark, then signalled for the next candidate to take to the air.

And so it continued for nearly an hour until everyone had had a turn and the twins returned from the far side of the field, both grinning broadly. One of them, Harry called him George, handed Harry a sheet of parchment and clapped a pretty red headed girl that must have been his younger sister happily on the shoulder.

*'Must be Arthur and Molly's youngest. What was her name? Gina?'*

Harry thanked them and then stood up, calling for attention. "All right, everyone. I'd like to thank you all for coming and trying out. It's good to see we have such a large pool of talent to choose from. I know some of you will be disappointed if you don't make it, but I plan to hold a similar set of tryouts next year for similar reasons. I'll be announcing who made what sometime in the next day or two, after I've discussed the matter with the rest of team and Professor McGonagall. Thanks again."

Slowly the crowd of students began to dissipate and make their way back into the castle, except for the

other members of the Quidditch team and Ron, Hermione and the young girl. Sirius was somewhat surprised when she sat down on Harry's other side and reached across Harry to scratch Sirius behind his ears.

"This must be Snuffles," she cooed, looking at Harry for confirmation.

For a moment Sirius was filled with blind panic, especially when Harry nodded. His godson must have felt his alarm, because he held Sirius in place with a firm hand between his shoulders and spoke directly to him.

"Don't worry, boy," he told Sirius, "Ginny's a friend. You can trust her. I do."

*'He does? What does he mean by that?'*

Harry turned from Sirius and looked at his team-mates, "I'm going to take poor Snuffles here to Professor Lupin's office, before he gets more lost than he already is. Why don't you get changed and I'll meet you in the Great Hall and we can discuss the tryouts there?"

"Okay, boss," nodded one twin, who shouldered his broom and grabbed one of the Chasers around the waist, dragging her along with him despite her protests.

"I don't know why she puts up with him," muttered one of the other girls.

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The remaining twin looked at her and grinned, "Because we're so lovably and cuddly?"

Ron snorted, "Cuddly?"

As the five Quidditch players departed Harry looked at each of his friends in turn, "Can I meet you guys in the common room later?" he asked. "I'd like some time alone with Siri- Snuffles."

"No problem, Harry. We understand," answered Ginny before her brother could protest. She stood and quickly shouldered her broom, grabbing Ron with her free arm. Assisted by Hermione they soon dragged themselves away, leaving Harry and Sirius by themselves in the empty Quidditch stands. Only after they had disappeared from view did Harry lean back and relax, "I can't feel anyone nearby. You can change now."

With a low pop Sirius assumed his human form and gave his godson a warm hug. Harry laughed at his enthusiasm, but returned the greeting wholeheartedly. After a while Sirius drew back and gave him a querulous look, "You can't feel anyone?"

"I can 'feel' the magic in people. Something I picked up over the summer."

"I'm glad your summer wasn't too bad with those Muggle relatives of yours," he told Harry.

Harry shrugged, "It could have been better. Still, I've had worse. In any case, it proved more productive than usual."

Sirius nodded, "So Remus and Dumbledore have told me. Prefect, teaching your own specialized class and now Quidditch captain as well."

"Me a Prefect," Harry shook his head in disbelief, "Considering the number of rules I've broken over the years and all the trouble I've managed to get myself into, I think Dumbledore must be off his rocker."

"He's always been like that," explained Sirius, remembering his days at school.

Harry chuckled and stretched his now long arms and legs, "Thanks again for my birthday present. It fits almost perfectly now that I've finally outgrown my 'midget' phase as Ron called it."

"You're welcome, Harry. I'm just glad you like it."

"How long are you staying this time?" Harry asked, "I figure this is just a stop over visit, right? Before Dumbledore sends you out again."

Sirius nodded and sighed, gripping Harry by the shoulder, "I'm afraid so. No rest for the wicked as they say." He ignored his godson's snort of amusement at the phrase. "I'll be staying in Remus' quarters until I have to go. Dumbledore says I'll be leaving in a week or so."

Harry nodded thoughtfully, but then smiled happily, "A week? That's great, longer than I was expecting any way. Can I bring Ron, Hermione and Ginny around later? I know they want to visit and Ginny hasn't met you yet."

"Ah yes, Ginny," Sirius looked sternly at Harry, "We are *definitely* going to have a talk about her before I leave."

"I told you I trust her."

He nodded his understanding, "And I trust your judgement. But still, the fewer people who know; the better."

Harry sighed and gave him a grudging nod, "I suppose. Hey, do you want to sit through one of my classes next week, during the evening? Some of the Professors occasionally come to watch, I'm sure nobody would be suspicious if Professor Lupin came and brought you with him."

"Harry, are you sure you can do all this? It's a lot of work," he asked, wondering if perhaps his godson was taking on too much work and responsibility. Sirius could remember James' last year at Hogwarts when he had been Headboy, Prefect and Quidditch captain. The pressure and stress had been exceptional and Harry still had another two years to go.

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"Of course I can, Sirius," he replied with a mischievous grin, "I can do anything; I'm the Boy Who Lived."

Sirius frowned, "Be careful, Harry. Accidents happen."

"They frequently do at Hogwarts," agreed Harry, mirthlessly, "Usually to me."

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## 11. The Long Haunted Nights

Harry was waiting calmly in the Practical Fighting Techniques auditorium, chatting amiably with his

friends. Ron, Hermione and Ginny were sitting in the front row, Harry standing on the stage opposite them as the rest of the class filed slowly in after dinner. As usual Ron and Hermione were having one of their daily arguments about something completely insignificant to everyone else, and themselves if they would pause to consider it. Harry and Ginny simply watched from the sidelines and spent a great deal of the conversation rolling their eyes.

Ron had been particularly surly and argumentative this week, apparently stemming from the fact that he had been selected as one of the Quidditch team's reserve Chasers. He had just been edged out of the running for the position of Keeper by a fourth-year girl. Carmen Ryder, a very cute brunette and close friend of Ginny's, had managed to save seventeen shots on the goals, beating Ron's tally of sixteen blocks. Even though Ron was still almost assured of a place on the team the following year, he had not been happy about missing the chance to place this year.

As his friends argued over the Transfiguration homework Professor McGonagall had given them that afternoon Harry tried to surreptitiously kneed the muscles in his neck and shoulders, which were drawn in tight knots of tension. He struggled not to wince as he pressed against a particularly painful spot.

Since the Quidditch tryouts the last weekend Harry had been getting even less sleep than usual, which even Harry had to admit was difficult. If anything his nightmares had become even worse this passed week, something Harry attributed to his encounter with Cho at the trials. There had been many times, in the early mornings before sunrise, that Harry had found himself wishing for his scar to hurt and to experience a vision of Voldemort and whatever scheme he was doubtless cooking up. Voldemort at least was a tangible enemy that Harry could deal with, a ghost he could lay to rest, unlike the others. He glanced up from watching Ron and Hermione's pointless bickering as a familiar shiver ran down his spine, the kind he felt whenever an animagus was nearby. Just coming into the auditorium he could spy Professor Lupin, with Sirius trotting by his side. Today, he knew, was the last day his godfather would be spending at Hogwarts before leaving for his next assignment the following morning.

*'So he's finally decided to come and see what I'm doing down here,'* Harry thought, as he gave his Defence professor and the large mangy dog at the rear of the room a wave.

The last students had wandered in and the large wooden doors slowly swung shut, causing Ron and Hermione to bring their quarrel to an end. Temporarily. Doubtless they could pick up where they had left off once they got back to the common room later.

Harry hid the yawn that escaped him as he made his way to the centre of the stage, listening as the room quietened down as everyone settled in and waited for him to begin.

"Ron," he called when it was finally silent, "Could you come down please?"

Looked a tad nervous Ron rose from his seat and made his way to the stage, receiving sympathetic smiles from Hermione and Ginny as he went. Being called to the stage usually meant a visit to the infirmary at some point in the future. Harry led him to one side where a long table rose up from the stage floor and indicated for his friend to sit. As Ron sank into the chair six chess boards sprung up from the tabletop, three set for Ron to play as white and the other three black.

"You're probably the best chess player at Hogwarts," Harry announced, "Looking forward and thinking ten moves ahead is a very useful talent, but life is seldom as clear cut as a single game of chess. Often you will find more than one battle being played out at the same time."

Harry reached to one side of the table and spun an hourglass around, watching as the fine grains of sand began to pour from top to bottom. He looked at the three boards where he was playing as white and in rapid succession move a piece on each board.

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"You have three minutes to make a move for every game. When you're done with all six, spin the hourglass around and it will reset, giving me three minutes to make my moves. If the sand runs out, you forfeit every game where you did not make a move. Clear?" he explained the rules to Ron and waited for the horrified redhead to nod before giving the hourglass a spin.

"Six games at once?!" Ron asked, gaping at him.

Harry, already walking back to the middle of the stage, looked over his shoulder, "Better get started, Ron, the sand *is* running."

He looked up at the rest of the students, trying to decide who to call upon. His gaze finally settled on the Slytherins, where Malfoy was slouched lazily in his seat. Apparently after a month and a half of being ignored by Harry he was beginning to regain his open disdain of Gryffindor and everyone else outside of his own house.

"Malfoy," Harry called, watching the pale boy rise from his seat. The chime of a bell from where Ron was sitting drew his attention and he quickly hurried over and moves a piece on each of the six boards without even bothering to look at them properly. He twirled the hourglass over again and was back in the centre of the stage before Ron's jaw could drop.

"The last few weeks I've been going over dodging and evading curses, hexes and whatever else might be thrown your way," he told them, motioning Malfoy into position opposite him, about ten or so yards away. "But there will come a time when there is nowhere to run, nowhere to hide and nowhere to jump. That is when the best tool in your arsenal is a Shield Charm, which we will be going over tonight."

"Thank Merlin!" exclaimed a voice from the back of the room, causing soft laughter amongst those seated.

*'Seems to me they're enthusiastic about not throwing themselves about tonight,'* he noted.

He had walked back to the table where Ron was sitting and completed his next six moves before Ron

had even finished twirling the hourglass. The redhead looked at him in aggravation as he switched the timepiece back to Ron and returned to where Malfoy was waiting.

"Malfoy, if you would be so kind," he addressed the Slytherin, "Please try to hit me with a curse. Give it your best shot."

Malfoy's eyes narrowed and he drew his wand. A hush fell over the auditorium as everyone sat silently, watching and waiting for Malfoy to make his move. Snapping his wand up Malfoy shot a Conjunctivitis Curse centred exactly between Harry's eyes. Harry, however, did not even flinch as the curse exploded in a shower of sparks a yard away from him, dissipating harmlessly against the shield he had silently erected.

"Thank you, Malfoy," he told his opponent and then turned to face the students. "As you can see a Shield Charm can effectively halt or deflect a wide variety of curses and hexes. However-

At the very last instant Harry jerked himself back and twisted about, a second curse cleaving through where he had been standing. Malfoy it seemed was not finished throwing curses at Harry and a yet a third for curse narrowly missed Harry as he threw himself to the floor, rising up in a low crouch. With a truly bestial snarl Harry's wand was clear of his robes and slashed in the direction where Malfoy was standing. The effect was immediate and Malfoy had no hope of evading the spell Harry fired at him. The pale haired boy was blown backwards, lifted into the air, as a thunderous crack sounded.

***\*A month ago you would have blasted him across the room before he even managed to finish that second curse. This can't go on much longer Harry.\****

*'It will go on as long as it needs to,'* he retorted, rubbing his shoulder where it ached from hitting the stage floor in his awkward roll clear of Malfoy's curse.

***\*For crying out loud, lad! You're using women's beauty tricks to hide how tired you look!\****

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*'Shut up and let me handle this.'*

"I said 'Thank you, Malfoy!'" Harry roared as Malfoy staggered to his feet, "Now get back to your seat before I lay you out in the Hospital Wing again!"

He watched cautiously, wand never straying away from the limping boy, as Malfoy made his way back to his seat on shaky legs. After he had literally dropped into his seat Harry spun around and stalked over to where Ron was waiting. Almost slamming the pieces against the boards he made his moves and snapped, "Check," before spinning the hourglass and stomping back to the centre of the stage again.

"Such shields can block just about any curse or hex that comes your way. Of course, just about any curse or hex can break a Shield Charm if it's not strong enough. The more powerful the spell, the more power you must put into the shield in order to deflect it," Harry lectured, quickly regaining his composure as he focused on something other than images of gutting and stuffing and then hanging Malfoy over a fireplace like a mounted fish.

"Only three curses can make it through a Shield Charm regardless of how strong it may be," Harry continued, beginning to pace restlessly, "These of course are the Unforgivable Curses; Imperious, Cruciatus and Avada Kedavra. The only way not to be hit by those curses is to not be there when they are cast."

***\*If only it were that easy.\****

*'Nothing ever is.'*

The bell attached to the hourglass rang just as Harry reached the table where Ron was scowling fiercely at the six chess boards in front of him. "Check. Checkmate. Check," he said as he shifted pieces around the boards, not even looking as he moved them about, not noticing the aggravation building within his best friend.

"Now the key to casting a successful Shield Charm," he continued speaking, "is a combination of power and focus..."

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The Great Hall was resplendent in a theme of black and bright orange, hundreds of hollowed out pumpkin heads drifted in the air, their candles casting flickering shadows in the subdued light. All Hallow's Eve had come to Hogwarts and the teachers had spared no expense in decorating the castle for the occasion. Jaunty tunes filled the air and the house tables had been moved to the sides of the Hall to clear room for a dance floor.

Only two people were to be not joining in the festive spirits, namely Snape, which was to be expected, and Ron, who was almost visibly fuming with repressed emotion.

One of the many black cats with orange paws, that had been acquired by McGonagall for the feast, jumped up onto the Gryffindor table, almost overturning Ron's glass of pumpkin juice. He snarled at the small feline and sent the poor creature scurrying away, meowing in protest. Scowling and wondering why they had to have an army of stupid cats running about and disturbing him at every opportunity Ron turned back to where Harry was sitting.

*'Merlin, not another one!'*

Since the Halloween feast had begun a couple of hours before Harry had been attracting a steady stream of visitors to the Gryffindor table. Worst of all was that most of them were girls, from every one of the other three houses and from every one of the seven years.

It had all started when Cho Chang, the pretty Ravenclaw Seeker that Harry had had a crush on the previous year, had come over to ask if Harry would join her for a dance. Harry had politely refused, apologising profusely and explaining that after the traumatizing experience of the Yule Ball last

Christmas, he planned to steer well clear of the dance floor. Somehow he had even been able to keep Cho around for a good ten minutes of small talk, mostly dancing around the topic of Cedric and the unfortunate events of the Third Task.

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After that it seemed as if a veritable open season had been declared on The Boy Who Lived, which brought forth every single girl, and even some of the taken ones, all determined that she would be the one to convince Harry to dance. Yet Harry politely and apologetically refused all their offers, always letting them down so kindly that even the first-year girls (who were often so nervous they could barely speak) left without feeling the least bit rejected.

Even the queen-bitch of Slytherin, Pansy Parkinson, had tried to persuade Harry to get up for a fast paced Tango. Despite his growing agitation at all the attention the girls were lavishing on Harry, Ron had to admit that seeing Malfoy's horrified reaction, when Pansy abandoned him to approach Harry instead, almost made it worth it all.

*'Why does he have to be the one to get all the attention?' he scowled. 'It's not like I want anyone other than Hermione, but does he have to hog the limelight every damn day?'*

Right then Harry was speaking with one of their fellow Gryffindors, a feisty second-year named Moira Mackay, whose thick brogue sometimes required deciphering. Unlike most of the other girls, Moira, it seemed, was trying to get Harry to dance solely because she felt that he was failing to have enough fun sitting at the tables.

"Och, coom awn, Harry! Tis naw li' i' wuיל kil' ye t' a' laes' trael!"

Harry laughed and resisted her attempts to pull him to his feet. Moira was exceptionally strong for her age, not to mention her size (she was smaller than Harry had been) and yet Harry seemed as unmovable as a statue, despite her obvious efforts.

"Moira!" he protested, prying his arms free of her grasp, "I said no!"

"Bae' yer nae hae'in' foon!"

"Don't worry, Moira," assured Fred, coming off the dance floor from dancing with Angelina, "O! Harry here's definitely enjoying himself."

"Yes," agreed George, drawing up hand-in-hand with Hermione, which did not settle well with Ron. He knew his brother had no interest in his friend, beyond perhaps pulling a prank on her, but he still felt that they should not be getting too close to the girl they *knew* he wanted to ask to the Yule Ball.

"After all," continued George, "having a fine young thing such as yourself repeatedly throw her body at him would be enough to make any man have fun."

"George!" Hermione exclaimed, swatting him playfully on the arm, only a moment before Moira disengaged from Harry and dealt him a resounding blow to the other arm.

"OW! What did I do?"

Moira, hands on her hips, glared up at him, "Ye ken bluddie wul whu' ye saed, Weasley!"

Everyone, with Ron being the only exception, was laughing as Ginny joined them with her dance partner. Ron's eyes narrowed as he watched her detach from Gareth Harriet, a third-year Jamaican boy who ended every sentence with the word "mon", and cross over to sit beside Harry. His best friend grinned as she sat down, leaning over to whisper something in her ear, making her giggle.

*'He's been doing that a lot since school started...'*

"So, like George, mon," Gareth spoke up, looking at the grinning twin, "Who're you takin' to the Ball this year, mon? We all know Fred's takin' Angelina, what about you, mon?"

"I dunno," replied George, dropping down onto the bench between Ron and Hermione. Ron glowered at the intrusion, even though he had not yet had a chance to speak to her.

Fred leaned over to Gareth and nudged him with an elbow, "But we do know who our ickle Ronnie wants to go with!"

Ron could feel the blood rushing to his cheeks and, worse, to his ears. He tried to fight the blush, but could do nothing about it except snap, "Shut up, you git!"

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"Come on, Ron," said Harry, draping an arm across Ginny's shoulders, "Just ask her to the Ball already, will you? None of us want a repeat of last year."

*'That... cocky... big-headed... arrogant... PRAT!'*

Ron whirled on Harry, blue eyes blazing and teeth bared in an angry snarl. "Easy thing for you to say, Potter!" he snapped, even more harshly than he had to Fred.

Harry's eyes narrowed a fraction as he pulled his arm away from Ginny and asked, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know what I mean!" he puffed, rising to his feet and stabbing a finger at Harry, "The great, bleeding, famous Harry Potter gets everything without ever having to work for it first."

"Ron," interrupted Hermione, also standing and trying to calm him, "You know that's not—"

But he refused to calm down. He was nice and angry and had worked up a good load of frustration that he could now finally vent. "Bull! He gets everything! Prefect, Quidditch star, team captain, the new pet for every professor except Snape!"

*'I shouldn't be saying all this...'*

The words were tumbling out of his mouth and with each moment that passed he thought of yet one more thing Harry had that he did not, "A magnificent Patronus, teaching his own damned class in his own damned hall, humiliating us every night with how brilliant he is! All the girls kissing the ground he walks on, a pile of gold that fills a vault that he's never had to work for... The easy life!"

*'I really shouldn't be saying all this...'*

Every one of the fine crystal goblets within ten yards of where Harry was sitting imploded in a spray

of pumpkin juice. The fine black and orange china plates shattered as though dropped from the Astronomy Tower and half a dozen of the pumpkins floating above them exploded, raining hot candle wax and soggy orange lumps down upon them.

Conversation abruptly ceased across the entire hall as everyone's attention was grabbed by this sudden outburst of destruction. The music continued to play for several moments, even though all the dancers had stopped moving, until one of the teachers silenced the song. All eyes had turned to Ron and Harry.

'Uh oh.'

Slowly, like a behemoth rising from the depths, Harry stood up. Behind him the Gryffindor table was actually trembling, the cutlery rattling as it shook and quivered. His face was completely expressionless and frightened Ron far more than if he had been shouting or raging about. In a flicker of movement Ron found himself looking down the length of Harry's wand, gaze fixed upon his friend's gleaming emerald eyes.

With the same slowness with which he had risen, Harry lowered his wand from Ron's face and then brought it to the side of his own head, the tip just pressing against his temple. For a moment Ron wondered if perhaps he had pushed Harry to the brink of suicide, but then Harry withdrew the wand, a gleaming silver strand of... something, clinging to its tip.

"You want my life so badly?" his friend asked, voice frighteningly devoid of any emotion or inflection. Harry's white knuckled hand shot out, flicking the glowing silver tip of his wand lightly against Ron's temple as though swatting at a fly.

"Here, try it on for size!"

**.oOo.**

*An impossibly large moon hung above him, filling a quarter of the sky and bathing the landscape in its cold, silver light. The wind whistled eerily around and about the headstones, rustling the thin carpet of dead leaves covering the earth. The bare branches of the few trees scattered about waved and creaked in ominous rhythm.*

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*Standing amidst the hundreds of ancient and uncared for graves, Cedric turned to him, grey eyes twinkling nervously in the gloom.*

*Wands out, d'you reckon?*

*Both his and Cedric's voices sounded faint and muffled, as if heard from a great distance.*

*Yeah.*

*They both drew their wands, shuddering as the wind whipped coldly across their backs. The shadow of a church tower loomed over them and suddenly he knew they were not alone.*

*Someone's coming.*

*A thick mist was swirling about their feet and was growing thicker each passing moment, quickly obscuring the black shrouded figure that was weaving its way towards them. The milky green mist was impossible to see clearly through, but he could tell the shadow was almost upon them.*

*Kill the spare.*

*Kill the spare.*

*Kill the spare.*

*Kill the spare.*

*The words reverberated and echoed throughout the graveyard as a blaze of green obliterated his vision, clearing after a timeless eternity had passed. When he could see again he was no longer standing alongside Cedric, but was bound tightly to a massive and sinister looking headstone.*

*You killed me.*

*He looked to one side and found himself face to face with Cedric, whose eyes were dead and as unseeing as a statue's. Cedric reach up with cold, clammy hands and pulled clawed harshly at his face and hair, condemning him for failing.*

*You killed me. It's your fault.*

*No...*

*Your fault I'm dead. You killed me.*

*No...*

*The cords were constricting and biting painfully into his chest. Tearing his gaze from the dead Cedric he glanced down and recoiled at the sight of a massive, seemingly endless, snake wrapped around him again and again. It's scales were coated in blood and some unnameable whitish slime, spreading coldly over his body.*

*Shuddering in revulsion and terror he looked up and found Peter Pettigrew, Wormtail, leaning over him, a gleaming silver dagger gripped tightly in one hand.*

*Flesh of the servant, willingly given - you will revive your master.*

*The dagger sliced upwards and he jerked backwards as a shower of blood sprayed over him, getting into his eyes and burning like fire. He could not see but the shriek of agony tore into him like ravenous wolves, his own body throbbing in sympathetic pain. He opened his eyes, everything he could see bathed in crimson light.*

*Where Wormtail had stood he found Ron, dripping with so much blood he could not tell where bare skin ended and hair began. Then, looking closer, he saw that it was not Ron's face, but a naked skull staring back at him, eyes empty and lifeless.*

*You killed us, you let us down.*

*No...*

*You failed us, you killed us.*

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*No...*

*Blinding pain shot through him from his right arm and his head slammed back, cracking against the headstone behind him. His vision blurred and world seemed to tilt and sway unsteadily, even though he was unable to move. He struggled to move his head and looked to the side. Hermione was pressing against him, dagger in hand, stabbing and twisting the blade into his flesh and chanting in a sing-song voice.*

*Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken - you will resurrect your foe.*

*Hermione's tangle of bushy brown hair was hanging limply around her face, falling away from her head in thick tufts that drifted on the wind. She snarled at him and stabbed the dagger deeper into the crook of his elbow, twisting and slicing and hacking at him.*

*You killed us, it's all your fault.*

*No...*

*You were weak, you let us die.*

*No...*

*The gigantic snake that held him up against the tombstone was gone and he stumbled forward, falling to his knees. He looked up and watching in horror and mounting terror as a thin figure emerged from the endless lake that bubbled before him. The moon stretched across a third of the distant horizon and gave the deathly pale man a golden backdrop.*

*A monstrous face loomed close and he felt himself biting his lips until they bleed, the thick liquid dribbling down his chin. The crimson eyes that peered at him were unnaturally wide and narrowed in loathing as the lipless mouth curled in cruel laughter.*

*You killed them, you brought me back.*

*No...*

*I can touch you now, I can destroy everything you cherish.*

*No...*

*You killed us.*

*You killed us.*

*You killed us.*

*All around him graves were breaking open as pale, dead bodies tore and dug themselves free of the earth they were buried in. He could recognize all their faces; Seamus, Lavender, Dean, Lee, Katie, Angelina, Neville, Alicia, Colin, Dennis and all the other Gryffindors. Those were the ones closest to him, as they grew further away they became less distinct, a mass of accusation that was bearing down on him.*

*Worthless boy, you killed them all.*

*His uncle was there now, standing over him, face purple with rage behind the bushy moustache.*

*Behind Vernon was his aunt, horse-faced as always and scowling at him with dislike, her shrill voice cutting at him like a knife.*

*We knew you'd foul up. A freak just like your parents.*

*Somehow he had stumbled to his feet and had begun running, trying to outdistance the mass of faces and tormenting, accusing voices that either shrieked or whispered in his ears. Headstones blurred past him as he ran, thorn bushes blocking the sides and ripping at his robes, his arms, legs and face.*

*He skidded to a halt and all the air left his lungs in a great rush.*

*Ruskyte The Order of the Phoenix page 87*

*Ginny was laying on the ground before him, naked, bruised and bleeding, her eyes wide open and staring lifelessly up at Voldemort, who was standing over her. Voldemort looked up from gloating examination of her still body and grinned wickedly at him, fangs gleaming.*

*Unable to stand any more he collapsed to the ground, curling up tightly and shutting his eyes against the horrors surrounding and chasing him. He began to whimper, softly and then louder, louder and louder, until he was screaming with all his impotent strength.*

*Make it stop. Make it stop. Make it stop. Make it stop. Make it stop.*

*Makeitstop. Makeitstop. Makeitstop. Makeitstop. Makeitstop.*

*Makeitstopmakeitstopmakeitstopmakeitstopmakeitstopmakeitstop...*

**.oOo.**

"Make it stop..." Ron half whispered, barely able to draw a breath. He honestly felt like either howling or crying, but couldn't manage to do anything except stare helplessly at his friend.

'What have I done?'

Harry stood opposite him, wand once again tucked up his sleeve, and was watching him with eyes that were bottomless pools of emotion. He looked... tired. So very tired that Ron was amazed he could even remain standing upright without support. Harry drew a deep breath, released half of it and asked Ron a question he finally knew the answer to.

Even though he wished he didn't.

"Still want to trade?"

\*\*\*

Hermione watched as Harry turned and silently strode out of the Great Hall, not bothering to wait and hear Ron's answer. She followed his rapid retreat until he disappeared out the main doors, then she turned to face Ron, who stumbled unsteadily forward and grasped the table for support. She was about to offer to help him sit when Ginny suddenly appeared at his elbow.

"You son of a bitch!"

If she had not been watching closely Hermione might have missed it. Ginny's arm arced around in a sharp right hook that hit her brother square in the face. Ron could count himself lucky that his head remained attached to his shoulders. He was still launched bodily into the air by the blow, landing with a crunch on top of the table behind him.

Seeing this Hermione decided that now was not the best time to point out to Ginny that she had just insulted her own mother while cussing Ron.

*'Yep, she's pissed off.'*

Ginny glared at him, with a stare of utter displeasure and sheer wrath that even Snape could not match at his most vindictive. Finally she gave a high pitched hiss, that reminded Hermione of a kettle boiling, and stalked out the hall after Harry.

"You really pissed her off," observed Fred, as he and George pulled Ron off the table and onto his feet, but keeping him pinned between them with a firm hold on his shoulders.

"Lucky really," agreed George, leaning in close, "Cause if she hadn't hit you like that, the two of us bloody well would have."

Ron was trying to staunch the stream of blood that was flowing thickly from his nose, wincing as he probed the injured area. Giving up hope of halting the blood flow he tried to shake free of the twins, who were pressing painfully down on his shoulder.

"How was I supposed to know his nightmares were that bad," he sputtered, "Hell, I didn't even *know* he was having any!"

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"Was it bad?" Hermione asked, offering him her handkerchief as she nodded to Fred and George to release him so that he could stand by himself.

He looked up at her and before he could speak she already knew the answer. His eyes were focused on a distant point as he sat down, remembering, shuddering involuntarily. Shaking himself out of his memories he looked helplessly at her.

"If you consider watching Cedric Diggory being murdered before your eyes and having everyone you know and care about saying it's your fault is bad," he replied.

"Aye," responded Moira, sarcastically, "We jus' mi'! Wha' i' bluddie Hades wuir ye thinkin'?"

Ron sighed and sank down, propping his elbows on the table as he dropped his bleeding face into his hands, "I don't think I was. I just pray I can fix this. Make it up to him."

"I don't know, Ron," Hermione looked to where Harry and Ginny had disappeared, "I think you've really screwed up badly this time."

\*\*\*

Ginny could not recall having ever been so angry with one of her brothers, not even after the teasing she suffered from the infamous elbow in the butter dish incident three years before.

*'That... that... that...'*

"IDIOT!" she seethed as she stormed into the Entrance Hall, coming to an abrupt halt when she spied two figures standing just within Hogwarts' massive front doors. The one she instantly knew to be Harry, who she had been intending to find. The other took a few moments for her to place, but suddenly there was a small smile on her face, despite her anger.

"Ah, Ginny Weasley!" boomed Hagrid happily, "Good ter see yeh, lass! My, my, yeh've grown since las' year, haven't yeh?"

"Hello, Hagrid," she greeted as she walked up to the two. She cautiously put a hand on Harry's shoulder and was relieved when he did not flinch or draw away from her. Instead he leaned close and wrapped an arm around her waist. "Are you all right?" she asked, unable to mask the concern filling her voice.

He nodded tiredly and managed to give her a wan smile. Hagrid, watching closely, seemed to pick up that something had happened and was quickly taking them by the shoulders and bustling them out the castle and towards his hut.

"Come on, come on," he told them, "Yeh can come to my place and talk about it."

They made the trek to Hagrid's hut in silence, Harry and Ginny with an arm wrapped around the other's waist, Ginny resting her head on his shoulder. It was dark out and she couldn't be sure, but Ginny was almost certain Hagrid was beaming happily down at them.

"Are you going to be taking over from Professor Grubbly-Plank, Hagrid?" asked Harry as the large man swung open the door to his home and motioned for them to enter.

"Aye, I will be, from next week," responded Hagrid as he followed them inside, taking off his tent sized moleskin coat and hanging it up, frilly pink umbrella poking out from one pocket. He bustled over to the stove and set a pot of tea on to boil, continuing, "I've got summat beautiful for your to work with this year, both of yeh. Magnificent animals they are, magnificent."

Harry and Ginny shared a look as they sat down. Knowing Hagrid, he had probably found a pet mantichore for them to study this year. He was a wonderful man and a stalwart friend, but his definition of magnificent and beautiful animals did not, unfortunately, correspond with how other people perceived them.

"So, what's yer problem, Harry?" he asked, placing a bucket sized cup of tea before each of them, along with a couple of his infamous rock cakes.

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Harry sighed, sinking further down into his chair, and started the explanation. It took some time, since he had to bring Hagrid up to speed with some of the things that had happened, such as his appointment as a Prefect, teaching Practical Fighting Techniques, being elected Quidditch Captain and such. Finally, as they were starting their second cup of tea, he finished

"I'm getting used to it," he shrugged, "It's becoming a yearly occurrence."

Ginny frowned, *'Harry seems very tired all of a sudden, almost as if...'*

It was hard to spot through the bright glow of his white, gold and scarlet aura, but Ginny could see the

faintest traces of a charm cast around Harry's face. Oddly enough it seemed similar to the makeup charms used by some of the vainer girls, Lavender and Parvati were prime examples.

Ginny pulled out her wand and said, "Finite Incantatem," and waved it in front of Harry's face.

"Gallop codswallop," breathed Hagrid as the charm faded away.

Harry had never looked worse, in Ginny's opinion. Dark rings surrounded his eyes, which were so shot through with red that there almost no white visible around the green of his irises. Lines of exhaustion were clustered around both his eyes and his mouth, making him look much older than he had a moment before.

"I haven't been sleeping well this week," he tried to explain.

*\*More than an a week. Not that he'd ever admit it.\**

*\*He's almost as stubborn that boy; Ron.\**

Ginny leaned forward to study his exhausted features and asked, "How long, exactly?" All he did was look at her, with no reply save a noncommittal shrug.

"When's the last time yeh had a good night's sleep, Harry?" insisted Hagrid.

This Harry responded to almost immediately, but the answer he gave did nothing to cheer them, "June 24th. After the Third Task," he said. "Madam Pomfrey gave me some dreamless sleep potion. It wasn't a good night, all things considered, but I did get nine hours uninterrupted sleep."

They both sputtered for a few moments, Hagrid even upset his teacup, before Ginny spoke what they were thinking. "You haven't had a good night's sleep in four *months*?"

"No."

"Why haven't yeh taken more potion?" asked Hagrid, patting at his tea soaked beard with a small towel, trying to

Harry sighed and closed his eyes, "It's addictive if used too often."

Ginny nodded, remembering reading about that in one of her textbooks for the year, "And even if you spread it out enough to avoid addiction, the potion will build up in the blood and eventually reach toxic levels."

He nodded and sipped at his tea.

"But surely there must be other kinds," she protested, "Something without all those harmful sideeffects."

We can ask -"

*\*Fraid not.\**

"There aren't any," Harry cut her off, "I've checked every kind of sleeping potion know to the wizarding world, and some that aren't known as well. The ones that aren't addictive will poison you quicker. The ones that don't poison you are even more highly addictive. There are a couple that do provide unaddictive and non-poisonous dreamless sleep, but they also knock you out for anywhere between a month and two years."

"A spell then?" she asked, even though she knew that by now Harry must have already thought of this, "Something like a, oh I don't know, a Congeniality or Cheering Charm, but for dreams?"

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He shook his head, smiling wryly, "Nothing that works as well as I'd like. The nightmares always end up seeping back in after an hour or so."

"Yeh having nightmares about You-Know-Who, Harry?" asked Hagrid, grabbing their cups to refill them. He didn't need to, they were still half full, but he seemed to need something to do.

"Cedric," Harry answered, the single word speaking volumes for him, "and others as well."

"Oh, Harry," Ginny felt her heart aching that he should be so burdened with guilt. He was only fifteen, just a boy. He was supposed to be worrying about school, Quidditch, girls and all the other things children that age did. Not this.

"It's not your fault," she told him, not liking the fact that she was certain he had been told this many times before, "There was nothing you could do."

"Yeah, everyone keeps telling me that. Still doesn't help me sleep at night."

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## 12. Survival of the Fiercest

Winter was beginning to encroach upon Hogwarts and the air now held a sharp bite in the mornings.

And so, when Harry, Ginny, her friend Carmen Ryder and Carmen's pet kneazle Quagga, strode out onto the Quidditch pitch as the sun crested the horizon, they had to carefully watch their footing to avoid slipping on the frost slicked ground.

Only one reason could bring them out here so early.

Quidditch.

The first match of the season was only a few hours away now and Harry, being the team captain, was out to inspect and evaluate the pitch conditions. Ginny and Carmen were both on the team and had come out to observe first-hand the inspection, something neither of them had seen before. Well, only Carmen was actually on the team; Ginny was one of the reserve Chasers and had been spending all of her time, outside of classes, with Harry recently.

Since the events of Halloween night there had been something of a strained relationship between Ron and Harry. While Ron's explosion of stupid jealous had been nipped in the bud almost as soon as it had started, he and Harry had not exchanged more than half a dozen words a day since then.

Hermione had, as was usual in any fights between the two, been caught in the middle and spent a great deal of time acting as an intermediary. Not that this time she was being forced to act as a messenger between the two. In fact it was exactly the opposite. Ron was barely able to remain in the same room as Harry and was completely unable to bring himself to meet his friend's gaze, not that Harry bothered

looking at him.

Truth be told, Harry was pretty much ignoring Ron completely. He would be surrounded by a dozen people and hold a separate conversation with each of them, yet would not even acknowledge that Ron was present. He no longer called on Ron during their nightly PFT classes and had even given responsibility for Ron's training as a Chaser over to Katie Bell, rather than supervise him. Quagga, his black and silver zebra striping blending in surprisingly well with the ground, was chasing after Harry's legs as they walked. Harry glanced down and chuckled, a broad grin on his face, after the kneazle gave a petulant swipe and hiss of frustration over the fact that his favourite scratching posts would not stand still.

"You're looking rather chipper today," Ginny noticed as they walked to the middle of the pitch. Harry smiled at her, "I've been taking Dreamless Sleep Potion since Wednesday night. I don't want to doze off while I'm supposed to be looking for the Snitch."

She beamed with delight at the news that he had at least been getting a couple of nights rest. Everyone now knew Harry had nightmares and trouble sleeping. Malfoy in particular had been making a point of mentioning every chance he got. Even only three nights of uninterrupted sleep had made a remarkable difference, completely erasing the lines of exhaustion that had been plaguing him.

"That's good to hear," approved Carmen, "Means Fred and George owe me a dozen of those Tweety Twirls they just started selling."

Ginny looked sharply at her friend, "What have they been saying about Harry?"

Carmen grinned, "They bet me that Harry wouldn't be getting any sleep before the match today. Seems they thought he'd be worrying too much to nod off."

"I'm going to have a *long* talk with them after the game," growled Ginny, looking up as Harry laughed appreciatively.

"Just as long as you don't break their noses and give them black eyes," he said, draping an arm across her shoulders and pulling her close to him.

Ginny scowled, "He deserved it. I'm only sorry Madam Pomfrey was able to fix him up so quickly."

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Harry laughed some more, "I'll admit, seeing Ron the Raccoon at breakfast the next morning was almost as much fun as transfiguring Malfoy into a ferret."

"I overheard the twins talking about that last Hogsmeade weekend," admitted Carmen, reaching down to pick up Quagga, "Apparently they're thinking of making a new Wheeze that produces a similar effect."

"What? Raccoon Raisins?" asked Ginny impetuously.

The trio were still laughing when they reached the kick-off area and Harry began his inspection of the pitch, continuing to chuckle every so often. Ginny and Carmen watched as he ran his bare hands over the frigid earth, giving it a few hard smacks here and there. To their amusement he was muttering softly under his breath the whole while.

"Nice and hard," he half whispered, "We'll get a reasonable kick-off..."

"Better be careful, Harry," warned Carmen, grinning, "Trelawney has predicted that, 'The lion shall be bearded in his den amongst the clouds this waxing moooon...'"

Harry looked up from where he was crouching and snorted disdainfully, "That silly old bat's just pissed off with me for dropping Divination. Since she can't predict my death to my face any more, she's got to do it vicariously through the rest of her students."

"Poor souls," agreed Ginny wryly, thankful that she had learnt from her brother's mistake and taken Arithmancy instead.

"So you have two teachers that hate you," Carmen summed up, "Snape and now Trelawney."

Harry cocked an eyebrow and stood upright. "Just Snape," he corrected, "Trelawney loves me. If it weren't for me she wouldn't have anything interesting to predict."

"Harry! Harry!"

They all turned towards the shouting voice, Harry groaning even before he caught sight of who it was.

They knew the owner of the voice all too well and Ginny had a hard time stifling the giggle that threatened to bubble up at the look of resignation that descended over Harry.

"Looks like the Harry Potter Fan Club is up and about," observed Carmen, her voice full of the amusement Ginny was trying to suppress, as they watched Colin Creevey running up to them.

"It's too early for this," moaned Harry as the new arrival screeched to a halt. Colin was flushed from his run and it took several moments before he was able to speak in a coherent, if gasping, fashion.

"Harry - you have to - the Great Hall - the team - bad - you have to - hurry - now!"

Ginny could feel the sudden tension radiating from Harry as he broke into a jog, having started the moment Colin mentioned the rest of the Quidditch team, all of whom Harry had ordered to the Great Hall for an early and uninterrupted breakfast. She tried to run alongside him, Carmen not far behind, but he had gone off like the wind and quickly disappeared into the castle.

"Did he have to grow so much over the summer?" she groaned.

*\*Of course he did. He's going to be fighting a dark lord soon, after all.\**

*'Don't remind me.'*

*\*Sorry, but it's in our job description.\**

*'You know, I bet Harry doesn't have cocky voices like you in his head.'*

*\*...\**

"I have a bad feeling about this, Gin," huffed Carmen as they entered the last corridor leading to the Great Hall.

"Want to bet the Slytherins have something to do with it?" she replied, slowing to a fast walk just outside the doorway.

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"My mum always tells me that you should never bet when you know you're going to lose."

"Pity, I could use some spare change."

"Want to bet it was Malfoy that started it all?"

"Like you just said, never bet when you know you're going to lose."

The two girls hurried inside and over to the Gryffindor table where Harry standing by five very lopsided looking figures, loud moans, groans and assorted curses filling the air. The rest of the Gryffindor Quidditch team were all in obvious and varying degrees of pain, clutching at their arms and legs, holding their stomachs or resting their heads on the table.

"What's happened?" she asked, taking in this alarming sight.

Before Harry could answer he was interrupted by a small blur that was accompanied by a high pitched squeal of dismay, horror and guilt. The figure crashed into Harry with enough force to almost knock him off his feet, revealing the diminutive form of a house-elf.

"Dobby is so sorry, Harry Potter, sir! We prepared the food, only the best for Harry Potter's friends and now they is sick! It is all Dobby's fault, Harry Potter, sir! All Dobby's fault. Bad Dobby, bad Dobby, bad Dobby!"

By this point the creature had released Harry and was, with each exclamation, bashing its head against the tabletop while pulling painfully on its ears. Ginny and Carmen exchanged a wide-eyed look as the eclectically dressed house-elf continued to punish itself.

"Dobby, stop!" ordered Harry, reaching out and pulling him away from the table.

"Sorry, Harry Potter, sir," groaned Dobby, shamefully gazing down at his feet, "But it *is* Dobby's fault Harry Potter's friends is sick, Harry Potter, sir."

Harry shook his head forcefully and directed Dobby's attention to the table, where the rest of the team were still suffering. He pointed at the plates of food that had been specially laid out for the Gryffindor team.

"It's not your fault, Dobby," he asserted, "Somebody hexed the food."

"What?!" exclaimed Carmen, outraged at the idea.

Ginny looked at the table and focused, drawing her concentration together and bringing her perception of magic to the forefront. Slowly the room, and everything in it, began to glow with swirls of magic, the people, their brooms, the enchanted ceiling... the food on the table.

"Son of a bitch," she breathed, "You're right."

He looked up from where he was comforting Dobby and nodded, "Nothing too dangerous, just a few simple, first-year curses and hexes. A Cramping Curse on the eggs, Nausea Hex on the sausages, Headache Hex on the bacon, Dizziness on the orange juice, Numbness on the pumpkin juice..."

"How can you tell?" asked Fred, groaning in discomfort as he wrapped his arms tightly around his middle as his right leg quivered uncontrollably.

"I can perceive traces of magic," explained Harry, "Something I learnt over the summer."

Ginny hid a smile, *'Learnt over the summer. Right. Just like I took a course in Parseltongue.'*

*\*Well you don't expect him to tell them the truth, do you?\**

Harry stood, keeping one hand on Dobby's shoulder, and looked over the sad looking forms of his team. It was just after six, Ginny knew, which gave them less than four hours before the match was scheduled to begin.

"It's nothing Madam Pomfrey can't fix right up," he sighed, but shook his head, "But they're in not fit state to play a game."

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"Are you going to cancel the match?" asked Carmen, reaching down to pick up Quagga, who had just arrived with a red-faced Colin in tow.

*'When hell freezes over.'*

"When hell freezes over," replied Harry. He looked across at Ginny and then down at Dobby, who was sniffing sadly and dabbing at the tears which were dripping down his face.

"So what then?" Ginny asked, reaching out to steady Angelina who was in danger of toppling over where she sat beside Fred.

"Carmen, get back to the common room," Harry ordered, "Tell the reserves to grab their brooms and meet us at the Hospital Wing. Looks like they'll be getting a chance to play against Slytherin after all." Her friend nodded briskly and, with Quagga clinging to her shoulder, departed the hall at a fast walk. Ginny and Colin straightened up and waited as Harry turned to them after watching Carmen leave on her mission.

"Come on," he urged, helping George to his feet, "Let's get them to Madam Pomfrey."

\*\*\*

Ron knew that one of two things was going to happen. He was either going to throw up or he was going to have a nervous breakdown. Whichever came first. The team was sitting the changing room, waiting for the call to enter begin what, for six out of the seven players, would be their first proper game of Quidditch.

*'Oh Merlin, I'm going to die.'*

Harry was pacing before them, expression grim, face set, and looking more like a great general marshalling his troops than a captain giving his team a pep-talk. His scarlet and gold Quidditch robes were billowing out behind him as he moved from one end of the change room to the other.

"Okay, listen up," he finally declared, "Malfoy wants dirty? I can do dirty."

The six of them exchanged nervous looks, well, only five actually, since Ginny seemed completely focused on Harry, her eyes not straying from him so much as a degree.

*'If only I had paid that much attention,' he thought sadly, 'Maybe I would've seen what was really going on and not screwed everything up.'*

Until that terrible moment on Halloween when Harry had shown him exactly what it meant to be The Boy Who Lived, Ron had had no idea just what his friend was going through. Unfortunately he had learned the hard way and possibly ruined beyond repair the one thing that should have meant more to him than anything else in the world.

Well, almost anything.

Only one good thing had come out of his disastrous confrontation with Harry that night. Giving the reason that she was simply saving him the trouble, Hermione had finally acted where he had not and asked *him* to accompany her to the Yule Ball.

*'Funny, considering it was that which got me into this mess. Oh, who am I kidding? I got myself into this mess all by my lonesome.'*

Ron's attention returned to the present, and the upcoming Quidditch match, as Harry resumed his prematch speech. With his hands clasped together and resting in the small of his back, Harry stood before them at what looked suspiciously like parade rest. A general indeed.

"Quidditch isn't about survival of the fittest. It's survival of the fiercest!"

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A few murmurs sounded as the team glanced between each other, wondering if perhaps Harry was not just a little bit... well. From all accounts the previous team captain, Oliver Wood, had been completely off his rocker and utterly obsessed about Quidditch. Ron could remember Harry telling him, when they were still on speaking terms, some of the maniacal speeches Wood had given before each of their matches. Apparently Oliver's fanaticism had rubbed off.

Harry moved to stand before the two Beaters, who were nervously fingering their clubs as they sat waiting to hear his instructions. "Seamus, Moira, when we get in the air there are only two things I want you to do," he told them, "Cover anyone who scores and put the Slytherin Beaters in the Hospital Wing if they so much as look at our people."

"Y'ken cownt un oos, Harry!" affirmed Moira, seeming very eager to start breaking skulls.

"I don't doubt that for an instant," he grinned, before turning from them to Carmen, who was sitting next to Ginny in the front row. Unlike Moira and Ginny, Carmen had not done her hair up in a tight braid, but had instead drawn it into a loose ponytail. Like Moira, she seemed a bit nervous, but still eager to head out and start flying.

"Carmen, as our Keeper you're the easiest target they have. You won't be able to move about all that much so keep your eyes open."

Carmen nodded and repeated a line Harry had been drilling into everyone attending his PFT class,

"The best way to avoid a fight is to see it coming. Gotcha."

Harry nodded and grinned again, before turning to the last three players. He smiled tenderly at Ginny, which caused Ron to fight a sudden feeling of jealousy. Not the brotherly protectiveness everyone expected from the twins and him, but simple jealousy. And not of Harry, but of Ginny. Just about everyone had noticed how the two had obviously been growing closer since the term had begun, but since Halloween the pair were practically inseparable. Just as he and Harry had been before things had fallen apart.

*'Harry's two best friends; Granger and Weasley,' Ron thought sadly, 'Just not the same Weasley that it used to be.'*

"How's your shoulder doing?" Harry asked her, a faint frown of concern lining his brow.

Ginny smiled and swung her left arm back and forth a few times in demonstration, "No problems. Madam Pomfrey said I shouldn't do any heavy work with it, but that's okay, I only throw with my right anyway."

Since Hagrid had returned, from his mission as an envoy to the giants, casualty visits to the Hospital Wing had expanded beyond injuries incurred during Practical Fighting Techniques. Ron, and everyone else, had not thought it possible for the grounds keeper to find creatures worse than Skrewts, but somehow the half giant had.

Cimmerian Ice Moths were undoubtedly worse.

Ginny had dislocated her left shoulder that Monday whilst trying to avoid the already infamous strands of ice silk the beasts tended to shoot at anybody that came too close. Naturally Hagrid insisted that the monsters were "only misunderstood". Unfortunately, so everyone in Gryffindor agreed, the Moths had not yet had a significant misunderstanding with Malfoy.

"Good," acknowledged Harry, his smile returning. It faded a short moment later when his eyes turned towards Ron, a distant coolness falling over his expression. Only a few seconds passed before Ron dropped his gaze to the floor, unable to meet his old friend's eyes. Uncomfortable silence dominated the changing room for a short while before Harry obviously turned away from Ron and to the last remaining Chaser.

"Gareth," he heard Harry say, "I want you to try and run interference for the other two, your Nimbus is faster than either of their brooms and more manoeuvrable. Use that to your advantage."

"Piece 'o cake, mon," responded the Jamaican boy.

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Ron looked up from the floor just in time to see Harry grin at the younger boy, who was busy running a hand over his shaved scalp. His friend nodded his satisfaction with their readiness and grabbed his Firebolt from where it was resting, propped against the back wall.

"All right then," he summed up, shouldering the broom, "Time to go hunting."

Hoping that his legs would be able to support him, they felt like jelly, Ron stood and with the rest of the team followed their captain out and onto the pitch. It was unlike anything Ron had ever experienced, hundreds of faces staring down at them from the elevated stands and a roar of noise that filled the air as they made their entrance.

"And here comes the Gryffindor team," boomed Lee Jordan's voice over the roar of most of the crowd and the various 'boos' and hisses from the Slytherin section. "Led on by their new captain, Harry Potter, it's the brand new team of Ryder, Finnigan, MacKay, Harriet, Weasley and Weasley, all of them playing in their first match today."

The Slytherin team was already on the field, standing behind Malfoy, who was smirking like a cat that had just had canary for breakfast. Madam Hooch strode between the two teams, the Quaffle in one hand and a whistle in the other.

"Captains, shake hands!" she ordered.

As they shook hands, with obvious reluctance, Harry leaned in close to Malfoy and growled, only just loud enough for everyone to hear, "I could break every bone in your hand right now, without even trying."

Malfoy went almost as white as chalk, the blood drained from his face that quickly. His smirk vanished and he swallowed nervously as Harry continued, "If you try anything underhanded, I *will* and in such a way that you'll never be able to hold a broom, or a wand, again."

\*\*\*

"Three... two... one... GO!"

Harry kicked off with all his might, launching himself high into the air and far above everyone else on their slower brooms. One of the advantages of being the only person flying a Firebolt. All around and below him the other players were blurs of red or green, swooping in and about each other as they battled for dominance.

"And Gryffindor have possession, Harriet passing to Ron Weasley who passes to his sister, Ginny. Interesting how Potter has managed to keep two Weasleys on the team despite the obvious sabotage by Slytherin earlier this morning that incapacitated-"

"Jordan!"

"Sorry Professor, just providing a little background," continued Lee, "Weasley passes back to Weasley who passes directly to Harriet - Oh, that was close! Harriet, flying a Nimbus 2001 by the way, passes the Quaffle to Weasley, Ginny, who almost unseats Slytherin Chaser Warrington with that close flyby. The Slytherin team had better watch out or she'll be breaking *their* noses, instead of her brothers-"

"JORDAN!"

"Sorry, Professor. Wait-" Lee suddenly jumped up, "She's taking a shot - SHE SCORES! The first goal of the match and the season - scored by Virginia Weasley! Ten-Zero to Gryffindor!"

Harry was grinning broadly and lifted his hands from the Firebolt's handle to give a short round of applause as Ginny arced back towards the Gryffindor goals. He tensed when he saw Bole, one of the Slytherin Beaters sweep in and smash a Bludger towards her, but relaxed an instant later when Moira seemed to appear out of nowhere. The small girl swung her bat up and hit the Bludger back at Bole so hard and fast all he had time to do was gape before it smashed into his stomach.

"Tae tha' ye bluddie Sassenach!" Moira crowed, waving her bat at the winded Slytherin as she continued to fly alongside an equally delighted Ginny.

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*'I have created a monster,'* thought Harry turning his attention back to the Snitch.

***\*It's alive! It's alive!\****

Deciding that late night horror movie marathons would not be on the agenda next summer, Harry cast his eyes to where the Snitch was hovering. He frowned as he spotted the glimmer of gold flitting about at the opposite end of the Quidditch pitch. Thanks to the Order's ability to see and feel magic, Harry knew exactly where the Snitch was at all times, simply by keeping track of the magic the Snitch was using to fly around.

*'Kind of takes the fun out of the game,'* he observed.

Pulling up on the Firebolt Harry rocketed into the air, high above where the game was continuing. He sat for a moment and then closed his eyes, concentrating on temporarily shutting down the influx of magical information surrounding him.

***\*That's dangerous, Harry.\****

*'If you want me to enjoy the game and relax, Quetz, you'll help.'*

***\*Why not just put a filter over the Snitch? That way you could still keep track of any threats that might show up, but still have fun?\****

Harry considered for a moment and then nodded, *'Sounds good, though I doubt there will be any threats to worry about. Voldemort is not going to attack the school during a game of Quidditch.'*

At the very last instant Harry had opened his eyes and spun around, reaching out with his right hand to grab the Bludger. There was a loud crack as the energetic ball smashed into his hand, quivered and shaking in his grip. Gritting his teeth, Harry glanced back to where the Bludger had come from and spotted Millicent Bulstrode, who's look of eager anticipation melted off her face as he grinned and winked at her.

*'Ugh. I think I just broke every bone in my hand.'*

***\*Not every bone, just a couple of the metacarpals. Nothing serious.\****

***\*Do you want us to fix it?\****

*'You have to ask?'*

*\*Just checking.\**

A soft heat spread throughout his hand and Harry could literally feel his bones healing. He cast his eyes around the field for a moment, noticing that almost all play had stopped and everyone was watching him in shock. He supposed that having the Seeker *catch* a Bludger instead of dodging it was something none of them had seen before.

"Oi! Seamus!" he yelled at his fellow fifth-year, who was the Beater closest to him, "Here!"

Harry flung the struggling Bludger toward the sandy haired boy who promptly smashed it across the field, right into the lap of Warrington. The boy nearly fell off his broom, dropping the Quaffle as he fought to remain airborne. The ball had barely left his grip when a scarlet streak swept underneath, plucking the ball from the air.

"And Gryffindor are back in possession," declared Lee, as Harry returned his focus to the game and resumed listening to the commentary, "After a brilliant piece of work between Potter and Finnigan. Seems like Harry plays Quidditch the same way he teaches PFT - He's bonkers!"

"Jordan!"

"Harriet passes to Weasley, Ron," continued Lee, twitching with excitement, "He passes to his sister who - Merlin's Beard! She *bounces* the Quaffle off Chaser Montague, picking it up again as she goes by - Aah! Look out! - She ducks under the Bludger sent her way by Bulstrode, passes to Harriet as MacKay deflects the Bludger right back at that bulldog."

"Jordan!"

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"Sorry, Professor," Lee, sounding anything but sorry, continued, "Harriet, son of the Jamaican Ambassador to England, passes back to Ginny Weasley - she throws a long cross - Ron Weasley has the Quaffle - he shoots... another ten points to Gryffindor! Forty-Zero!"

As Harry expected, the Slytherins were unwilling to let any goals go by without retribution. Bole, who had recovered his wind, swooped in close with a shoulder and elbow. Ron slipped as the large Beater brushed against him and fell clear off his broom. For a moment Harry felt his heart stop as he watched Ron topple off his Comet 260, arms and legs flaying about. At the very last instant one of his long arms shot out and his hand snagged a shaky grip on the broom's handle.

"Ron! Hang on!" he clearly heard Hermione shouting from the stands.

Ron, dangling fifty feet in the air by one hand, turned his head to look where she was standing and shouted back, "The thought had occurred to me!"

*'I just hope they invite me to the wedding.'* Harry mused already directing his Firebolt towards where Ron was drifting. He was peripherally aware of both Moira and Seamus waving their bats at Bole and cussing up a storm. He was alongside Ron now and reached out with one hand, grabbing hold of his friend's scarlet robes and hauling him upright without any apparent effort.

"You okay?" he asked as Ron settled back onto his broom.

"My entire life flashed before my eyes," replied the breathless redhead, before flashing a grin of relief across the narrow space separating them, "Didn't take as long as I thought it would."

The loud cheers of encouragement from the Gryffindor stand suddenly became groans, causing Harry and Ron to swear as they saw what had just happened.

"Oh no! The Slytherin Chasers take advantage of the distraction," groaned Lee, "It's three against just one as they score. Forty-Ten."

Again Harry and Ron cursed, simultaneously and both saying exactly the same thing, causing the pair to pause and look at each other in mild surprise. Harry gave Ron a half smile for a second before turning serious, looking over the other's shoulders. Hovering not far away was Malfoy, a smug expression on his face as he congratulated his Chasers on finally scoring. Hissing angrily Harry looked back at Ron, who had followed his gaze and was looking equally furious.

"I don't care how you do it," he told Ron through clenched teeth, "But you will make damn sure we're *at least* a hundred points ahead of that smarmy bastard when I catch the Snitch."

"Aye aye, skipper," responded Ron, wheeling his broom around and rocketing towards the Slytherin goals, reaching out to catch the Quaffle as Ginny threw it to him.

Relaxing his white-knuckled grip on the Firebolt, Harry resumed circling the pitch, aware that Malfoy was keeping a close distance behind him. He watched Ron pass to Gareth, who punched the Quaffle down and into Ginny's waiting hands, catching the Slytherin Keeper completely off guard.

"Fifty-Ten to Gryffindor!" exclaimed Lee, "Looks like Malfoy's thugs have only managed to piss the lions off."

"Jordan!"

The game progressed along a similar vein for sometime, Gryffindor clearly the superior team in every aspect. Twice Harry spotted the Snitch bobbing up and down in the gentle breeze and both times he ignored it, waiting instead for the score to mount. Malfoy flew right by it the second time, completely oblivious to its presence. Only once did the Slytherin Chasers managed to squeeze through the furious defence Seamus and Moira were mounting and passed Carmen, who was earning her position.

"One hundred and ten points to Gryffindor!" crowed Lee happily, half an hour later, "Slytherin with only a paltry twenty points to show for their efforts! Potter has clearly put together one hell of a fine team!"

"Jordan!"

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For the third time Harry spotted the Snitch, hovering high above the Ravenclaw stands, almost directly over where Cho Chang was standing actually. Deciding that the scorecard could only get better, Harry deliberately stiffened his posture and snapped his head in the opposite direction to where the Snitch

was. Out the corner his eye he could see Malfoy sitting up and watching him closely, thinking that Harry had seen the Snitch.

*'Time to prove to him that there's more to Quidditch than funds and fancy brooms!'*

Leaning down low Harry pushed his Firebolt into action, streaking across the field like a bolt of crimson lightning, almost unseating Bulstrode as he zipped passed. He could feel Malfoy trailing behind him, his Nimbus 2001 struggling to keep up with Harry's Firebolt. Harry smiled as the wind whipped through his hair, keeping his Firebolt only just within the speed range of the pursuing Nimbus, making certain that he would not unexpectedly lose Malfoy.

He banked to the right and curved down low, the trailing ends of his robes brushing against the ground before he straightened up. It had been a fast move, but not too difficult, and Malfoy had managed to stick with him through it, pushing his broom to the limit to keep up. Glancing over his shoulder Harry saw that Malfoy, as he had expected, was paying more attention to Harry than to where they were headed.

A split second before impact Harry pulled back with all his strength, jerking the Firebolt up and to a complete stop in less than a second. It was a great pity that Malfoy shot passed him so quickly, because Harry would have loved to see the expression on his opponent's face the moment he realized what was about to happen.

The tip of the Nimbus 2001 smashed into the foot of the stands, catapulting Malfoy head over heels and into the air. The broom shattered under the impact, splintering into a spray of wooden fragments. The dumbstruck Slytherins, whose stand Harry had deliberately aimed at, were literally bowled over as Malfoy slammed into them with the force of a runaway freight train.

"Whoa!" exclaimed Lee over a roar of satisfaction sounded from the non-Slytherin spectators as Harry slowly rose into the air and began circling the pitch. "I used to think the Wronski Feint was dangerous - that was unbelievable! Superb braking by Potter - Malfoy's broom has been reduced to toothpicks!" Harry was flying casually over the stands, his eyes focused on the glimmer of gold that had not moved much since he had last checked. As he reached the Ravenclaw section he glanced at Cho, who was watching him closely with a broad grin, and winked at her just as he snapped his right arm out. He grinned and turned to where Lee was sitting, still commenting on Malfoy's misfortune, and raised his hand high above him.

"And Potter's caught the Snitch!" roared Lee, spotting him, "The game is over! Gryffindor win, two hundred and sixty points to twenty!"

The spectators, excluding the Slytherins, cheered loudly and the Gryffindors were soon running onto the pitch in celebration. Harry glided to the ground, where he was met by his ecstatic team in a swarm of hugs that threatened to crack his ribs. Seamus and Ron were yelling incoherently and slapping each other's backs, Ginny and Carmen were squealing in delight and jumping up and down and nobody could understand a word of whatever it was Moira was saying.

First to reach them was Hermione, who didn't appear to know whether she should be laughing and congratulating them, or crying distraughtly over Ron's close call. Finally she decided to do both and enveloped the blushing boy in a fierce, tear-streaked hug, loudly informing him that if he ever scared her like that again she would perform an exceptionally painful operation on his lower regions and feed him the result.

Next came the Quidditch team, all of whom had finally managed to escape Madam Pomfrey's tender mercies and attend the game as spectators. Fred and George were delighted and started dancing a complex looking jig with their protégé Beaters Seamus and Moira. Alicia, Angelina and Katie took it upon themselves to sweep Ginny and Carmen into a group, making it five squealing girls that were bouncing around.

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***\*They're almost as crazy as those knights Arthur used to hang around with.\****

*'Almost?'* Harry was grinning so broadly that even having Colin, and his ever present camera, try to shake his arm off could not repress his high spirits, *'I'm sure they're more so.'*

Ginny broke away from the other celebrating girls and pushed Colin forcibly away from Harry. She then threw herself at him in an ecstatic hug that held more force than even Molly Weasley could manage. Wrapping his arms around her and returning the gesture, Harry decided that this was even better than when they had won the Quidditch Cup in his third year.

*'Much better.'*

Ruskbyte The Order of the Phoenix page 101

## 13. Tis the Season

"Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way..."

With a tremendous amount of effort Harry strained every muscle in his body and finally succeeded in cracking his left eye open the barest fraction, groaning as the light of the fifth-year boy's dormitory assaulted him.

Harry was now taking one draught of Dreamless Sleep Potion every week and a half, at the insistence of Ginny, Hermione, most of Gryffindor, several Hufflepuffs, a few Ravenclaws and the entire staff of the school (including Binns, but excluding Snape, which levelled it all out). He should have waited until that Friday to take the next dose, but since today was special he had skipped ahead of the schedule and taken it the previous night.

As much as he hated the idea of getting up Harry was unfortunately now wide-awake and within a hairs-breadth of vaporising Dean Thomas, who was carolling at the top of his lungs. Ron and Seamus, who were also reluctant risers, seemed likely candidates to help hide the body, Harry noticed as he sat

up in his bed and glared at the excited boy.

***\*It does seem wrong to be so energetic this early in the morning.\****

***\*Still, it is Christmas.\****

*'And your point is?'*

"Come on!" urged Dean, hitting a still slumbering Neville with a pillow, "Presents!"

Rolling off his bed Harry grabbed the new dressing gown he had bought during the summer and put on his slippers, grumbling under his breath that it was a good thing he had taken the potion and had a decent night's sleep. Otherwise Dean would not be celebrating Christmas with them, now or anytime in the future.

"Remin' me t' kill 'im t'morrow," complained Ron, also pulling himself out of bed.

"Only if yah lemme help," concurred Seamus, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

Dean, oblivious to their death glares, continued to bounce happily around, "Presents!"

Finally, after Ron and Seamus had dressed and Neville was roused, the boys exited the dormitory and bounded eagerly down the stairs and into the common room. Masses of brightly wrapped presents filled the large room and several students were already there and beginning to open them.

"Merry Christmas, Harry!" greeted Ginny, throwing her arms around him as she leapt up from where she was sitting with Hermione and several other girls. With his face buried in Ginny's currently unruly hair Harry could vaguely hear Hermione greeting Ron in a similar fashion.

"Merry Christmas, Gin," he told her as he reluctantly withdrew from her arms and gave Hermione a warm hug, "Merry Christmas, Hermione!"

Hermione beamed up at him and, after returning his embrace, grabbed hold of both his and Ron's arms and dragged them over to where a truly huge mound of presents sat. "Come on you two, we've been waiting forever. We've put all our presents together so we can open them together."

**"POTTER!!!"**

A loud bellow sounded from up above and a few moments later the common room was filled with laughter as Fred and George came charging down the stairs. Their faces were chalk white, which brought out their vibrant green lips and fire engine red noses. Topped off by their now electric blue hair, which stood out as if they had stuck their fingers in an electrical socket, the twins were now literally Gryffindor's resident clowns.

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Struggling to breathe, he was laughing that hard, Harry looked up at the two of them from where he was sitting beside Ginny. "I guess you tried the Chewing Clown Gum," he managed to say between guffaws, his explanation bringing a fresh wave of laughter from everyone present. Turnabout was most definitely fair play when the twins became the butt of a joke like this.

"You did that?" asked Hermione, holding a hand to her chest.

Harry nodded and turned to the twins, who were glaring at him in outrage, "Don't worry, it will wear off about five minutes after you spat out the gum. An hour or so if you swallowed it in your... surprise."

Fred looked at George. George looked at Fred. Fred's bright green lips twitched. George's bright red nose wiggled. A moment later the two had found the humour in the situation and had joined in the peals of laughter.

"Brilliant gag, old bean!" declared George, clapping Harry on the back.

"You'll have to tell us how the stuff works," demanded Fred, shaking his hand vigorously.

Harry smirked at the two clowns and told them, "The instructions are at the bottom of the box."

The words had hardly left his mouth before the pair were bounding up the stairs and back to the dormitory almost as quickly as they had descended earlier. It was many minutes before normal conversation could resume in the common room after they left, but finally everyone's attention turned back to their presents and the delightful task of unwrapping them.

"I should have known," laughed Harry, looking at the edition of *Hogwarts: A History* Hermione had given him, holding the book up for Ginny and Ron to see.

"Why'd you give him that?" asked Ron, looking at her, "You know he'll never read it. Not while we have you around." Hermione smacked him on the arm by way of reply and then thanked him for the set of peregrine feather quills he had gotten for her.

Blushing red as a beet Ron turned to his stack of presents and opened the package sent by his mother, groaning as he pulled out the customary Weasley jumper, in maroon naturally. Ginny was quick to start teasing him on it being his "favourite" colour and he responded by chucking one of the smaller presents at her.

The gift unwrapping continued for some time, each gift being received with a broad grin and a profusion of thanks to the giver, if he or she was present. Harry was pleased to receive a pair of dragon hide boots from both Sirius and Remus; a thick leather belt with an intricately cast buckle in the shape of a lion from Ron, a curiously wrought iron giantish rune from Hagrid; and a pair of mismatched socks from Dobby. The Dursleys had ignored him entirely this year which did not bother Harry in the least.

The best present though, Harry thought, was the one from Ginny. It was a new wristwatch, to replace the one that had broken during the Second Task the previous year. Unlike Harry's first watch, this one was a wizarding watch and did much more than simply tell the time. Harry swept Ginny up in a warm hug and immediately strapped the timepiece to his wrist, delighting Ginny when this revealed that he was wearing the knotted leather cords she had sent him for his birthday earlier in the year.

By now all the presents had been opened except for two. The one was a long rectangular box for

Ginny, from Harry. The other was Harry's present to Ron, which the disheartened Weasley had not yet been able to find. It was obviously just by looking at him that he thought Harry had declined from getting him a present this year. Since the reserve Quidditch team's spectacular defeat over Slytherin Ron and Harry had begun a slow process of reconciliation, but they had yet to fully rebuild their friendship.

With a look of utmost anticipation on her face, Ginny tore the wrapping away from her present and, licking her lips, pulled the top off the box. After several breathless moments she finally opened her eyes, which she had shut upon opening the box, and looked inside. All sound within the common room ceased and every pair of eyes turned towards her as Ginny shrieked loudly.

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"Well?" asked Ron, leaning forward and trying to see inside.

With trembling hands Ginny reached into the box and, with a dazed look in her eyes, withdrew a broomstick. It was magnificent. No broom ever built, except perhaps a Firebolt, could compare to the sleek and elegantly crafted implement Ginny held in her hands.

"The handle's made from cherry wood," Harry told her, looking for the first time uncertain about the gift and wringing his hands together nervously, "The twigs in the tail are a mix of yellow and redwood. It's almost as fast as a Firebolt, but you'll find it handles more like the Nimbus series."

"It's wonderful," breathed Ginny, eyes glistening as she looked from the broom to Harry, "I've never seen anything more beautiful."

Harry ducked his head and half whispered, "I have. That's why I built it for you."

If the silence in the common room had been utter before then, now it was complete. Ron made a small choking sound and gaped at Harry in disbelief, his eyes almost popping out of his head as his mouth worked by made no sound.

"You - you made it?" Ginny asked, looking down at the broom in awe. She held it, if possible, with an even lighter touch, as though it would disintegrate into sawdust at the slightest bump.

"Don't worry, it's not that fragile," Harry told her, seeing her sudden hesitance. "The only thing with more protective charms on it is Hogwarts. Over a hundred of them, the strongest I could manage."

Ginny looked at him for a moment and then deliberately put the broom to one side. She stared into his eyes and suddenly launched herself at him, as if shot from a cannon. She crashed into him and sent them both sprawling to the floor, arms and legs tangled together.

"Oh, Harry," she told him, pushing herself up and sitting straddled across his hips, "I don't know what to say. It's so much..."

"Don't say anything," he told her, grabbing her by the waist and lifting her up and off him as he rolled out from under her. As much as he liked the idea of having Ginny sit in his lap all day, he doubted either of them would appreciate the attention that would draw. "Just make sure you put it to good use." Returning to where he had been sitting, surrounded by his already opened presents, Harry glanced at Ron, who was suddenly looking very deflated. Hiding a grin he snapped his fingers and pulled out a crumpled note from one of his dressing gown pockets.

"Here, Ron," he told his friend, "I almost forgot to give you your present." He handed the note to him and then sat back to watch. Ron looked at the note despairingly; it wasn't even a proper Christmas card. He sadly unfolded the note, brow puckering in confusion as he read it.

"Don't scream?"

He looked up at Harry and, before he could say or ask anything, vanished with a pop. Hermione gave a short shriek and jumped to her feet, while everyone else gasped with varying degrees of alarm, alternating between gaping at where Ron had been sitting and where Harry was sitting.

"Where is he? Where is he? Where is he?" Hermione was babbling, fast approaching a state of absolute panic when a roar unexpectedly sounded from upstairs in the boy's dormitory.

**"YYYYYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH  
!!!"**

Harry leaned back and smiled smugly, "The note was a portkey back to our room," he explained as the roar tapered off. "The scream means he just found his present."

A few moments later they all heard the dormitory door slamming open and the pounding of feet on the stone floor as Ron barrelled down the stairs and back into the common room. When he entered, everyone began smiling just as broadly as Harry, for Ron was carrying a finely honed and crafted piece of cherry wood, with a collection of yellow and redwood twig bristling at the tail end. He came to a halt in front of Harry, waving the broom in disbelief and completely unable to speak.

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Harry rose from his seat and held out his hand, saying earnestly, "Merry Christmas, mate."

The common room erupted in a hail of cheers as Ron tossed the broom to one side and engulfed Harry in a bone breaking hug, tears of joy and relief brimming in his blue eyes.

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Breakfast that Christmas morning was a fun and laughter filled affair. The twins, putting Harry's gift to good use, managed to turn several dozen people into clowns afterwards by supplying the Chewing Clown Gum as an after meal breath freshener. The only Gryffindors to fall prey to their latest Wheeze were Hermione and Neville; the former having been so wrapped up reading the massive tome Harry had given her to realize who it was that gave her the gum; the latter simply being himself.

After spending nearly half an hour chasing his brothers around the Great Hall, trying to hex them with every curse he knew, Ron finally admitted defeat and returned to his seat next to Hermione. It was only his valiant efforts on her behalf, just moments before, that prevented her from hexing him when

he commented that at least she didn't have a tail this time.

Finally satiated and replete with food the Gryffindors, along with several students from other houses that had heard about it, worked their way through the two or so feet of thick snow that blanketed the ground. Once outside they had congregated at the Quidditch pitch and watched with amazement and awe as Ron and Ginny took to the skies on their new brooms.

Brother and sister were two black blurs, capped in fiery red, as they streaked around the pitch. An impromptu race around the stadium several times came about after a few minutes. Finally, after weaving in and out of the stands and around each other, the pair descended to earth and nearly suffocated Harry while trying to thank him.

After lunch, which was spiced up by the twins having jinxed the food so that the Christmas Puddings were not only flaming but also explosive, the Gryffindors ventured outside once again for a massive snow fight. A fair number of Hufflepuffs joined in, but the Ravenclaw and Slytherin students preferred to simply watch from the sidelines.

In the late afternoon, the students returned to their common rooms and dormitories to prepare for the Yule Ball that night. Harry, accompanied Ginny back to Gryffindor Tower after the snow fight had come to an end.

"I've got another present. Just for you," he whispered in her ear, just before they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady, "I'll give it to you later, before the Ball."

"What?" she asked as he helped her through the portrait hole and into the common room.

Harry wagged a finger chidingly, "Uh uh, that would ruin the surprise."

'*God she's beautiful.*' he couldn't help but think as she pouted playfully at him, jutting her bottom lip out and staring at him with puppy dog eyes. Or what he thought were puppy dog eyes, Aunt Petunia had never allowed any pets into Privet Drive, so Harry had never really seen one.

***\*Those are the kind of eyes minstrels and bards write songs and poems about.\****

'*I most definitely agree.*'

"Alright," Ginny reluctantly agreed, starting up the staircase. "I'll be expecting to find both it and you when I come down."

"I'll be waiting," he replied, watching her run up the stairs until she disappeared around a bend in the staircase. Smiling with satisfaction he crossed the room and sank into his favourite chair by the fire, trying to relax against the anticipation building within him.

***\*Good zing you arranged zis ozzier present,\**** noted Joan, ***\*Giving ze girl you love a broomstick for Christmas? 'Onestly!\****

***\*Not exactly a gift that says 'I love you' is it?\****

'*There you go again with this love business,*' Harry sighed.

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***\*We have hundreds, thousands of years worth of experience. Trust us.\****

'*That's usually my first mistake.*'

It was several hours before he needed to get ready, so Harry spent the time in the common room, alternating between arguing with the Order or chatting with the other boys who felt three and something hours was a bit more than they required. Finally, an hour before he and Ron had agreed to meet with Ginny and Hermione, he made his way upstairs to make himself presentable.

He spent half an hour in the shower, standing under a powerful jet of scalding water, letting the water play on his back and shoulders. One of the benefits of being a Prefect was access to the Prefect's Bathroom, but Harry seldom used that except for when the desire stuck him to have a long, relaxing soak in the gigantic bath. But here in the Gryffindor Tower, a piping hot shower was the very next best thing.

Finally Harry emerged from the steaming bathroom and began to dress. After pulling on a pair of black trousers he briefly considered wearing the dragon hide boots Sirius and Remus had gotten for him, but decided to wear the plain black shoes he had planned to. Then he slid a crisp and neatly pressed collared shirt on. It appeared white at first glance, but was actually a very light shade of green. Lastly Harry turned to his dress robes.

As with the previous year Harry would be wearing green robes, but this time the material was a darker green, so dark as to be almost black when seen in dim lighting. Only the lining was the same bottle green from before and even that was accented by a cut of emerald green at the neck and cuffs.

He found it both amusing and frustrating the not even the nearly unmatched power of the Order could tame the unruly mop topping his head. Only at the sides, where the hair was cropped close to his head did something approaching neatness reign. Otherwise, after a dozen charms and spell, Harry settled for the usual organised chaos that he had inherited from his father.

***\*All-in-all you look dashing, Harry.\****

'*Thanks, Isis. Fortunately so does Ron.*'

Harry appraised his best friend, with whom he had finally buried their most recent hatchet, and smiled at the sight. True to their word Fred and George had purchased their younger brother a set of new dress robes and Harry had to admit, the twins (despite their idiosyncrasies) had made a fine choice for him.

The cut was exceptional, but not grossly expensive, in a fashionably modern style. Not anywhere could even a hint of lace or ruffles be seen. Most importantly was the fact that the robes were not maroon, nor even the threatened green and lilac. Instead Ron was dressed in a mix of royal and navy blue, that complemented his eyes and moreover his hair very nicely.

'*Definitely an improvement, not that that is difficult,*' Harry mused as he, Ron, Dean, Seamus and

Neville made their way back down to the common room. It was only Ron, Seamus and himself that were waiting there for their partners; Dean and Neville would be meeting theirs in the Entrance Hall just before the Ball began.

They, along with most of the fourth, sixth and seventh-year boy, had been waiting in the common room for several minutes when Harry's head turned to the stairs.

***\*Your date will be here soon.\****

*'I've been meaning to ask about that. How'd you lot always seem to know what Ginny's doing?'*

***\*Ever since you shared the power with her there's been a bond between her and the Order.\****

Harry suppressed a puzzled frown, *'She can hear you as well?'*

***\*No, not really. Not until she accesses the power fully, and in large amounts.\****

***\*Right now she can only sometimes pick up on us. It's like listening to a conversation in the room next door. She thinks we're figments of her own imagination.\****

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He nodded his understanding and drew the attention of the other boys, "They're coming down."

Ron looked at him in surprise, "How can you tell?"

"I use my own special technique," Harry answered wryly. After all, it certainly was special, but who would believe him if he ever revealed it? The voices in his head told him? Right. He would be in a padded cell at St. Mungos before the night was out.

"Oh? What is it?" asked Dean, curiously.

"I keep my eyes and ears open, and my mouth shut..." Harry tapered off abruptly as two visions of beauty made their way gracefully down the stairs leading down from the girl's dormitories.

Once again Hermione had pulled off an amazing transformation and was looking quite beautiful,

Harry had to admit. Her normally bushy hair framed her face in sleek and shiny hazel ringlets, just a hint of makeup was applied to bring out her eyes and accentuate her full lips. Her robes were a deep violet and indigo. She looked every bit as wonderful as she had at the previous Yule Ball.

Harry scarcely noticed, his attention was so fully focused elsewhere.

She looked radiant, simply radiant. There was no other way to describe it, he thought. All that was missing were the wings and a halo and then Harry would be standing in the presence of an angel.

*"Some say the word will end in fire, /*

*Some say in ice. /*

*From what I've tasted of desire /*

*I hold with those who favour fire..."*

Harry whispered it, the words inaudible to everyone but himself, as he stared where Ginny was standing, waiting beside Hermione, at the foot of the stairs. He could not remember where he had heard or read the poem, it had probably been when he had attended Muggle school in Little Whinging. Somehow it seemed eminently appropriate when looking at his friend.

Ginny had swept her hair up into an elegant French twist, exposing the creamy curve of her neck. The cream and silver robes Fred and George had procured for her seemed to float around her slender frame, yet also hug her figure in all the right places. Like Hermione she was wearing just enough makeup to enhance her features, especially the warm brown of her chocolate coloured eyes.

"Well?" the two girls chimed, making Harry realize that both he and Ron had been gaping for nearly a minute without saying a word (muttered poetry aside).

"I have never seen anything more beautiful," he told them, stepping up to Ginny and hoping that he wasn't blushing too brightly.

Ginny ducked her head at his praise and, after a moment spent fighting down her own pleased blush, looked at him with wide eyes and asked impishly, "I believe you have something to give me?"

Harry grinned, "Indeed I do, Milady." He reached into his robes and withdrew the small, velvet lined box he was carrying. With a flourish he flipped the box open, using a little magic and slight of hand to return the empty box to his pocket, and held his gift up for her to examine.

"Harry..." she breathed, sounding even more awestruck and touched than when she had opened the earlier gift and found the broom he had built.

Stepping behind her, Harry slipped the necklace in place around her neck and fastened the clasp, returning after he was done. The fine silver links that made the thin chain matched her robes perfectly and the seven rubies, cut like raindrops, seemed to glow the same fiery red of her hair.

"Harry," Ginny tried to speak, the faintest tones of protest in her voice. Harry reached up and placed a finger on her lips to shush her. Once she was quiet he gently took her hand and bowed, only just brushing his lips against her warm flesh. Even this barely made contact burnt like fire and Harry was glad he had opted to be a gentleman and kiss her hand, he would surely have combusted spontaneously from anything more.

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Standing up straight and releasing his hold Harry smiled shyly at her, "May I have the honour of escorting you to the ball, Milady?"

Ginny fairly glowed with pleasure as she linked her arm with his, "With pleasure, Milord."

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Hermione was pleased with the attention she and Ron garnered as they entered the Great Hall, her arm resting lightly in the crook of his elbow as he led her to their table. She was also a bit relieved to note that Harry and Ginny were definitely attracting a fair bit more attention than she and Ron. This was fine by Hermione, especially after the Yule Ball last year, when she had gone with Viktor Krum. The attention had felt nice then, but she still felt uncomfortable under so much scrutiny.

She could not help but smirk slightly as they passed by Malfoy and his date, Pansy again. Ever since

Slytherin's shocking defeat at the hands of Gryffindor's reserve team, Malfoy had gone out of his way to steer clear of Harry and his friends. Hermione wondered if it was because of his week long stay in the Hospital Wing following the match, or the thoroughly insulting Howler his father Lucius had sent him after Draco was forced to request a replacement broom.

As Malfoy made an obvious attempt to surreptitiously get out of their way, Ron leaned close to her and muttered, "How I wish he was like this all the time."

*'Unfortunately I doubt it will last.'*

Hermione nodded her agreement and, looking around the room to admire the decorations, suddenly came to an abrupt halt. They had spent a sort time in the Entrance Hall, talking, and had lost track of their fellow Gryffindors in the process. Hermione had just located their fellow fifth years, who were motioning them to join them at a nearby table. But that was not what brought her to a standstill. It was Neville and, holding his arm... Cho Chang?

"O-kay..." said Ron, spotting them, "Now I've seen everything."

"He did say it would be a surprise," agreed Harry, "And it is."

"I hope Cho's wearing steel capped shoes," commented Ginny, obviously recalling her attempts at dancing with Neville the previous year.

The quartet made their way over to the table and exchanged greetings and a few pleasantries before taking their seats. Hermione was pleased, and flattered, when Ron pulled her chair out for her. She glanced at Harry, who was doing the same for Ginny, who grinned and winked at her. Seating her self, Hermione thanked Ron as he sat down beside her, Harry on her other side and then Ginny.

Next to Ron was Cho and then Neville, who seemed quite tongue-tied in the presence of the pretty Ravenclaw Seeker. Hermione wondered briefly how he had managed to stay coherent long enough to ask her to the dance. Next were Seamus and his date Moira, who was the only second-year present and the youngest person at the Ball. Apparently the pair had hit off quite well during Quidditch practice. The last couple, before coming back to Ginny and Harry, were Lillian Jordon, from Hufflepuff and Bill Renault, one of Cho's Ravenclaw friends.

A white flash and a loud click jolted everyone's attention to one side, where Colin Creevey was standing, faithful camera in hand. His date for the evening, a Hufflepuff girl of the same year, appeared to be supplicating the heavens and mouthing, "Why me?"

"Hey, Harry!" he exclaimed, before being dragged off, "Looking spiffy!"

"I have never in my life," observed Harry after Colin was well gone, "been so tempted as I am whenever that boy is down on stage during PFT."

Everyone chuckled and began commenting on Harry's status as the school celebrity. Opinions were varied and ranged from envy to commiseration. Hermione was pleased to note that Ron seemed a bit uncomfortable with the topic and was remaining firmly silent.

*'Maybe he's finally starting to learn.'*

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"Excuse me, Ginny," asked Cho, pulling away from the topic of Harry's reluctant fame, "But that necklace you're wearing..."

Ginny fingered the gift and smiled, "Harry gave it to me for Christmas."

"It's beautiful," agreed Lillian, pushing her glasses up and leaning forward for a better look. She turned to Harry and asked, "Where did you buy it?"

Harry smiled shyly and blushed. Hermione couldn't help but smile at her friend's embarrassment. Even after everything that had happened over the years, Harry still felt uncomfortable whenever thrust into the limelight.

"I didn't buy it," he told Lillian, looking at Ginny with a surprisingly tender expression.

*'He loves her,' realized Hermione, 'Even if he doesn't know it yet.'*

A moment later what Harry had just said registered and Hermione found herself gaping at him, her mouth falling slightly open.

*'Sweet Merlin. He made it.'*

Harry was saved from having to answer any further questions by Dumbledore, who gently tapped his knife against the crystal goblet set out before him. After the all students and teachers had quietened down and sat waiting for him to speak, Dumbledore stood up and spoke softly.

"First things first, but not necessarily in that order," he said, blue eyes sparkling merrily over the tops of his half-moon glasses, "Let the feast begin!"

As the headmaster sat down everyone picked up the small, neatly printed menus that were resting on their plates. Glancing over the selection, Hermione finally settled on the Trout Amandine with pineapple and orange. To drink she asked for fresh pineapple juice, since no alcoholic beverages were available and, she had to admit, pumpkin juice got tiresome after a while.

Waiting for her dinner to arrive, it only took five or so seconds anyway, Hermione watched as Ron, who had ordered before anyone else, tucked in. Fortunately his behaviour this evening seemed not only more mature, but also more refined, as he restrained himself from attacking his food as he usually did. Still, Hermione had no doubt that he would finish two helpings before she was done with her own. Taking her pineapple juice in hand, she secretly loved the stuff, Hermione brought the goblet to her lips and took a small sip.

*'Huh?'*

Hermione looked at the clear crystal goblet in consternation. It looked like pineapple juice. She lifted it to her nose and took a whiff. It even smelled like pineapple juice.

*'Then why does it taste like a bubblegum milkshake?'*

"Wha' th' hell?" asked Ron, looking down at his plate of food, a scowl on his face.

"What's the matter, Ron?" she asked, distractedly, still contemplating her drink.

"My dinner," explained Ron, waving a hand at his food, "it tastes like lamb chops."

Ginny looked at her brother as if he were slightly mad, "So what's wrong with that?"

Ron frowned across the table at her and protested, "It's supposed to be fried sea bass!"

"Somehow, I find that a relief," commented Harry, holding his goblet of deep red juice up for inspection, also frowning, "It might explain why my apple juice tastes like coffee."

Everyone's attention suddenly focused on Seamus, who was making strange gasping noises and was so red in the face he almost match Ron's hair. Wheezing and waving his one hand before his wide open mouth, Seamus reached for his goblet of bright orange pumpkin juice and down the entire drink in a single long gulp. For a moment he sighed with relief and then suddenly his eyes bulged outwards and a horrified expression contorted his face.

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"Seamus?" asked Moira, worriedly.

"The carrots," explained Seamus in a gasp, not really clearing up the matter, "Don't touch the carrots. They're hot - like pepper! And the pumpkin juice... it was asparagus!"

Neville was prodding his meal cautiously with his fork, "The rice tastes like clams."

Across from him, Bill shook his head, "No, the rice tastes like eggs."

*'Something very strange is going on here,'* Hermione thought, looking down at her trout.

Beside her, she was aware of Harry and Ginny exchanging a look of sudden understanding. The pair both sank back in their chair, sighing and shaking their heads. Everyone looked at them, since they obviously had an explanation for this puzzling occurrence.

"Fred and George," said Harry.

"They're screwing with us," confirmed Ginny.

Cho nodded her agreement, "I think you're right. They seem to be looking over at our table quite a bit. I was wondering why."

Moira looked at the plate before her and then pushed it away, "Y'muin t' sai thae th' tui o' 'im hae hexed th' bluddie food? Lie befuir th' Quidditch game?"

Harry shook his head, frowning slightly, "No, I can't see or feel any magic on the food or the drinks. Whatever they're doing, it's not being done to the food."

Hermione contemplated the table, everyone knew by now that Harry seemed able to pick up on any spells that had been cast. How he could do this was still a mystery, but if he said that the food was untainted, she was inclined to believe him. So then, if whatever was affecting them was not part of the meal...

"The flower arrangement," she said, "Why are all the flowers white or pink and only that one is yellow?"

"None of the other tables have any yellow flowers," observed Ron, craning his head around.

Harry plucked the offending flower from the arrangement, looking it over and shaking his head. He handed it to Ginny, who also examined it. "A Switching Spell," the red head said, handing it back to Harry, who pulled out his wand.

*'How does she know that?'*

"With some Confusion and Sensorium Charms mixed in," agreed Harry, waving his wand over the flower and then returning it to its place in the arrangement, "Simple really."

"But effective," summed up Bill, "You eat the rice, which is perfectly fine, but the charms mix up the signals your taste buds send to your brain, making you think it tastes like eggs."

"Or red pepper," muttered Seamus, glaring at the table where the twins were sitting.

"Those buggers!" exclaimed Ron, joining Seamus in glaring at his brothers.

Hermione put a hand on his arm to calm him, noting that Harry had a wicked gleam in his eyes as he leaned forward to ask something. "Cho, Neville, do either of you have your wand?"

Neville shook his head, but Cho nodded sharply, "Never leave the dormitory without it."

Harry smiled, "Can you get a clear shot at the twins?" She nodded. "Excellent, I have something that will make this morning's clown escapades look like the work of an amateur."

"What do you have in mind," Hermione asked as Cho drew her wand and surreptitiously aimed it in the direction of the twins, causing Lillian and Bill to lean cautiously out of the way.

"You ever played snooker, Hermione?" replied Harry, aiming his own wand at Cho's, "I'm going to bounce my spell off Cho's wand, just like sinking the eight ball."

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There was a brief shimmer in the air around both wands and then Harry returned his inside his robes, Cho however was gaping with wide eyes and an open mouth. Everyone turned as a series of giggles broke out from around the hall as people began pointing towards the twins.

"Oh my god," choked Hermione, unable to believe what she saw.

Fred and George were sitting at the table across from them, talking with their dates, Angelina and Katie. Completely, totally and utterly oblivious to the fact that they were clad in nothing save their boxers.

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Ron watched as Fred and George swung by Hermione and him as they danced to a slow ballade, the invisibility charm Harry had cast on their robes finally worn off. He sighed, both from the memory of their reactions when they finally noticed their apparent lack of apparel and from disappointment that the spell had only lasted half an hour.

*'Ah, if only I had a picture of it.'*

"Don't worry," said Hermione, obviously reading his thoughts, "I'm sure Colin must have taken a dozen or more photographs of them."

He grinned gleefully at the thought and turned his attention back to his dance partner, who he was hold close as they slowly swayed back and forth. He had never been so relieved to have good dress robes as he had been when Hermione, and his sister, had come down from their dormitory that evening. He would have to remember to thank the twins later, but only after teasing them for a while about Harry's retaliatory shot.

As the two of them moved around he spotted Harry and Ginny dancing nearby, holding each other in their arms even closer than he was holding Hermione. The two couples drew closer and Ron could hear a snippet of their conversation as they passed each other.

"You're a very good dancer," he heard Ginny saying.

"Really?" Harry sounded pleased.

Ginny grinned mischievously, "No. But you're better than Neville."

Grinning as well, Ron looked at Hermione, who had also caught the exchange. They smiled and Ron asked in a teasing tone, "What about me? Am I a good dancer?"

Hermione nodded, "Not bad. From the look of it, better than Harry."

"What about Viktor?" he asked, suddenly curious as to how he stood up against the only other man Hermione had ever danced with. He was quite surprised when Hermione jerked away from him, an angry look on her face.

"You just *had* to bring that up? Didn't you?" she accused, hands on hips, "Ron Weasley, you are such a jealous prat!"

Ron watched in amazement and disbelief as his date for the evening turned on a heel, violet and indigo robes swirling behind her. He shook his head as Hermione stalked off, looking to see that Harry and Ginny had stopped dancing and were standing nearby, watching.

"She's nutters!" he declared, suddenly feeling frustrated. "Completely off her rocker! Is mental illness contagious?"

Harry looked at him and sighed, "You have problems."

"I'm aware of that," he said, "But so does she."

"Of course she does," agreed Ginny, "After all, she's attracted to you, isn't she?"

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Ginny watched as her brother stalked off the dance floor in pursuit of Hermione, who had gone to one of the buffet tables to find herself a drink. Chuckling at Ron's antics she shook her head and smiled up at Harry, who seemed equally amused.

"May I have this dance, milady?" he asked, bowing and taking her hand in his.

"Don't you want to see how it will turn out?" she asked, motioning to where Ron was approaching Hermione.

Harry smiled and gently pulled her close to him, slipping a hand around her waist and beginning to dance, "I already know."

They danced through the current song and, without stopping, continued into the next one, holding each other close and maintaining eye contact the entire time. Ginny could look into Harry's eyes forever, they were so bottomless. Yet, despite the feeling that she could easily find herself lost in those eyes, she was never afraid.

Near the end of that dance, only a few minutes before midnight, Ginny spotted Ron and Hermione coming back out onto the floor, arm in arm. They were both grinning stupidly as they assumed a position and began to sweep across the room.

"Told you," whispered Harry in her ear.

"I guess you did," she agreed, looking up and finding his so close to her.

*'So very close.'*

Her face and body felt like they were on fire and without realizing it Ginny pressed herself closer to him as they continued dancing. Harry tilted his head to one side and slowly leaning in to her, his eyes never leaving hers.

*'Oh, sweet Merlin,' she realized, 'He's going to kiss me.'*

Their faces were less than an inch away, their lips practically touching. Ginny could almost already feel his lips against hers. Just as his lips brushed, feather light, against her, Harry jerked back, the blood visibly draining from his face.

"Aaargh!" he cried, dropping to his knees, "No! Dammit, no!"

Ginny suddenly felt her heart stop as she saw that Harry was pressing the palm of his hand hard against his forehead. His scar, something was clearly wrong with his scar. Before she could move to help him or anything else, the floor began to shake and tremble slightly, the cutlery on the tables rattling as all activity in the room came to an abrupt halt.

*'What's happening to him?'*

*\*You have to ask?\**

For a moment Ginny thought that whatever was happening to Harry was causing him to create the sudden vibrations, much like what had happened at Halloween. But when the entire Great Hall gave a violent shudder, she realized that whatever was happening was too far spread to be something Harry was causing. There was something about the shaking, which had now stopped, that made Ginny pause. It had felt like how she imagined an earthquake would felt.

*\*Not an earthquake. An explosion. A big one.\**

A deep, but hollow sounding, rumble seemed to seep its way into the hall, as Harry grit his teeth against a scream that threatening to escape him. Everyone was looking around nervously, although Ginny couldn't help but notice that Malfoy was suddenly looking more smug than he had in weeks.

*\*The village. Hogwarts' protective wards don't extend that far.\**

"Hogsmeade!" exclaimed Harry, struggling to his feet, "Voldemort's attacking Hogsmeade!"

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Noisy chatter exploded throughout the hall as everyone began talking excitedly. Dumbledore and several teachers were making their way to where she and Harry were standing, looks of concern on their face. Before they could reach them, however, Harry jolted into motion and fled the Great Hall at a full on run. Ginny immediately followed him, accompanied by almost everybody in a rush into the Entrance Hall, through the front doors and outside.

As the students stepped out onto the front lawn they drew to a horrified halt. Down, passed the lake, and in the valley, the village of Hogsmeade was burning. Billowing columns of smoke rose into the night sky, illuminated from below by the orange glow of raging fire. And worst of all, hanging high above them, glowing and sparkling where they hung, a dozen Dark Marks.

*'Oh no. It's started.'*

Ginny, with Ron and Hermione right behind her, quickly found Harry. He was standing there and watching the devastation with a look on his face that Ginny prayed would never be turned on her. It was cold and hard, the expression of a dangerous man becoming angry.

"I've got to get down there," he said, stepping forward.

"Harry, you can't!" protested Hermione, reaching out to grab him by the arm.

"I have too!" Harry pulled free of her. "Dammit, don't you understand? People are dying!"

Dumbledore swept up from behind them, his face grave. McGonagall, Snape and Lupin stood beside him as he spoke. "It will take too long a time for you to get there, Harry. By the time you do, it will already be over."

"Then I'll set a speed record!"

That said, Harry did the impossible and disappeared away from Hogwarts.

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## 14. Reluctant Allies

Harry Potter was exceptionally pissed off when he returned to Hogwarts the following morning, stalking up the front stairs and almost blowing the massive oak doors off their hinges as he stormed through them. He strode through the Entrance Hall, not noticing the one or two students that were staring at him with wide eyes. The doors leading into the Great Hall burst open before he even reached them and he continued on without breaking stride.

His thoughts were such a whirlwind of disorganized, unfocused rage, that he completely failed to properly realize that he was back inside the castle and everyone in the room was gaping at him. Harry had never been so angry in his life. Not even that time when he had blown up Aunt Marge like a helium balloon for insulting his parents.

Dumbledore had been right, he seethed. By the time he had apparated into the blazing ruins of Hogsmeade, Voldemort and his Death Eaters had long since vanished. He had the knowledge of the most powerful witches and wizards in history at his finger tips, their experience and advice at instant beck and call, enough power to level a mountain without breaking a sweat...

*'Useless.'*

The word curdled in his mind, the thought accompanied by waves of power surging up and straining to escape. The four house tables rattled and shook unsteadily as he stomped down the centre of the hall, towards the staff table. He barely noticed.

It was not that Voldemort and his followers had escaped and gotten away that fuelled his anger. It was not that those who had ravaged Hogsmeade were free and unpunished, for Harry knew that one day they would all get what was coming to them. One day. All of them.

No, what was really bothering Harry was how utterly and supremely useless he felt.

Voldemort had struck the first blow in this war and Harry had been completely unprepared for it and completely unable to prevent it. And that failure to do something hurt more than anything.

*'Well, at least I won't be having nightmares about Cedric anymore,'* he thought darkly, *'At least, not just Cedric.'*

***\*You need to calm down, Harry.\****

*'Calm? Calm?! Calm?!?! I am as calm as you will ever see me!'*

***\*That's reassuring.\****

"Um, Harry?"

Harry snapped his head around, recognising Ginny's voice. She, Ron and Hermione were standing a few feet away at the Gryffindor table. All three had looks of concern on their faces, which did nothing to cool Harry down.

"What?!" he barked, his mood so foul not even Ginny would alleviate it. Thinking about it later he would be surprised that he failed to notice the entire Gryffindor table, behind his friends, leaping a foot into the air and crashing down with a calamitous bang. So for that matter did the Hufflepuff table, which was behind Harry,

Ginny blinked at his tone, but seemed to realize that he probably didn't mean it. Keeping her voice perfectly calm, in counterpoint to Harry's mounting frustration she said, "Sorry to point this out, but you're standing three inches above the floor."

This time it was Harry that blinked, dropping his gaze down and discovering that it was true. He was hovering a full three or so inches in the air. He blinked again at this realization and decided that he must be even angrier than he had thought.

***\*I think you'd better calm down, Harry. Before you break the castle.\****

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*'Good idea. I've got enough to answer for already.'*

Closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, Harry tried to bring himself back down to earth. It was not easy, all things considered. His experiences in Hogsmeade that night would leave Harry to remember it as the worst night of his life, even worse than the night Voldemort had been resurrected.

Being unable to fight or kill anything, Harry had done the only thing he could do; try to minimize the damage and rescue any survivors. It had not taken him long to realize that there was frighteningly more of the former and only a pitiful few of the latter.

The deep breathing was helping, as was considering the incident from an analytical stand point, so after a few seconds Harry could feel the stone floor of the hall beneath his boots. Opening his eyes, he saw that his friends were looking at him with relief, although he could still see a great amount of concern on their faces.

"Sorry," he apologised, raking a hand through his hair, "Last night was not a good night for me. For anyone. I'm a bit... wound up."

For the first time since this debacle had begun Harry became aware of his physical condition. His dress robes were torn and burnt in places, indeed some parts where still smouldering, and there was such a thick layer of soot, ash, grim, dirt and even blood, that it was impossible to tell what its original colour had been. His almost white shirt was in just as bad a state, what could be seen of it was streaked black, brown, grey and red. The red was a particularly horrible sight in that it was clearly a bloody handprint, where one of the victims of the attack had grabbed hold of him.

He could tell from running his hands through his hair that it matted and snarled with grime, ash and... other things. Naturally he couldn't see his face, but Harry was willing to bet that it was in a similar condition to his hands. They were covered in ash, grim and yet more blood, the sight reminding him of some of the things he had seen and done over the course of the night and early morning.

*'No wonder they all look so horrified,'* he thought darkly, trying unsuccessfully to suppress the shudder of revulsion wracking his lean frame.

***\*You smell as well. Very fire and brimstone.\****

Everyone was staring at him with similar expressions, and Harry noticed with some wry amusement that almost everyone had backed nervously away from their tables. The Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs in particular seemed to be intent of standing. Briefly wondering if perhaps he should reassure them all that the tables would be jumping around again, Harry turned back to his friends.

"We understand, Harry," said Ron, blue eyes wide and anxious.

"Not bloody likely," replied Harry, snapping involuntarily. He stopped immediately and rubbed at the bridge of his nose, an old habit from when he still wore glasses, and sighed a tired apology, "Sorry. I'm just... tired."

A gentle hand on his shoulder made him look up, almost smiling at the sight of Ginny's chocolate brown eyes only inches away. "It's all right, Harry," she told him, standing back and releasing her hold on him, "We do understand that you're... tired."

Harry grimaced and looked over her shoulder at Hermione, who was shifting from one foot to the other and back with great rapidity. She was obviously trying to hold herself back, Harry had seen her like this before when waiting eagerly to ask one of the professors a question. And he could what this particular question was about.

*'Cat's out of the bag now.'*

***\*If you wanted to be discrete you should not have apparated in front of the entire school.\****

*'I was in a hurry.'*

"Ask your question, Herm," he told the fidgeting girl, "Before you pop."

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"Harry... how did you *do* that, last night?" she finally asked, stepping forward and wringing her hands nervously together. Harry could feel the eyes and ear of everyone in the Great Hall focus on them, also wanting to hear his explanation. "Leave the school, I mean."

Ron glared at her, "How can you be worried about something like *that* at a time like *this*?"

Harry, not wanting to have to put up with one of their fights right then, answered before things could escalate. "If you have enough energy you can do just about anything."

"But- but- but, Harry!" Hermione protested, as he had known she would. She sputtered for a few moments and then continued, "Breaking through the anti-apparation wards around Hogwarts... the energy requirements... they - they would be..."

"Nearly infinite," he finished for her dryly.

Hermione nodded her head decisively, "Precisely!"

She seemed quite happy that he had agreed so readily with her and vindicated her faith in the written lore of *Hogwarts: A History*. Harry smiled slyly as he looked at her and decided to let her down gently by way of explanation. "You'll find, Hermione," he told her, "That there's a big difference between nearly infinite and truly infinite."

Complete silence descended over the Great Hall as the meaning of his words sank in and the looks he was receiving showed that most of them understood. He would have preferred to let slip that he was slightly more powerful than everyone had thought in private, but was simply too tired to give a right damn about it at the moment.

***\*Slightly more powerful?\****

***\*Well, how would you describe it and still remain modest?\****

***\*How about; I'm powerful, I'm strong, I'm cool, I'm a badass, blah blah blah...'\****

*'I'm going to need therapy.'*

Harry shrugged off the chatter in his mind and then shrugged apologetically to a stunned looking Hermione, a speechless Ron and a thoughtful Ginny. After fishing around for something to say he gave another shrug and explained, "My 'growth spurt' of magical abilities was somewhat more... extensive than I led Dumbledore to believe."

It was clear, just from the expressions on their faces, that even if the rest of Hogwarts was prepared to accept this explanation, Ron, Hermione and Ginny did not. The three of them knew him better than anyone and could tell when he was lying. It did not help, Harry mused, that he was not a very good liar. He had only managed to keep matters quiet this long by being evasive when he could and telling just enough of the truth when he couldn't that nobody questioned just how much he was leaving out.

*'No use crying over spilled milk,'* he decided.

Placing his hands along his spine and arching his back, Harry stretched out and half yawned as his muscles groaned and creaked, "I'm tired. I'm going to bed."

He started towards the nearest exit, aware of the eyes following him, and in the case of his three best friends doing more than just follow him with their eyes. Normally he would be able to feel them behind him, their auras as familiar to him as their faces, but he was too tired for that. Besides, he could hear the footsteps quite clearly.

"How's life treating you, Potter?"

***\*It's the arsehole again.\****

Harry drew to a halt just outside the Great Hall, Ginny, Ron and Hermione alongside him. Trying not to lose his cool, Harry turned slowly to face the person who had spoken. Malfoy, with the ever present Crabbe and Goyle, was leaning against the wall, a sheath of paper in one hand.

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"Like he caught me in bed with his only daughter," Harry said, unable to keep a sharp edge from creeping into his voice. Malfoy was looking exceptionally pleased with something, his grey eyes gleaming maliciously as he pushed off the wall. "Don't make me angry today, Malfoy," he warned through clenched teeth, "You may not survive the experience."

It was Hermione naturally that spoke up as the usual voice of reason, but this time her voice held a note of worry it seldom had before. "Malfoy, I think you'd better listen to him," she advised the Slytherin boy.

Save for a disdainful sneer, Malfoy ignored her and closed the distance between him and Harry, lifting up his hand so Harry could see what he was holding. It was a newspaper, he realized, the early addition of the *Daily Prophet*. The headlines made Malfoy's point more clearly than any word he could speak. **ATTACK IN HOGSMEADE!**

**OVER A HUNDRED DEAD!** "I'm fully aware of how many people are dead, Malfoy," Harry hissed venomously, lifting his hands up so that everyone could see the grime and blood coating them. "A good number of them died in my arms."

Malfoy's sneer broadened into an evil smile, "I hope they were all Mudbloods or Muggle lovers like that fool Dumbledore."

*'Can I kill him? Please?'*

***\*If it'll make you feel any better.\****

"Okay," Harry declared, "I'm going to kill 'im."

His movements were a blur, although Harry had no trouble following what he was doing, and by the time his companions could react it was already over. He had started with a downward knife hand strike to Malfoy's collarbone, followed by a tight spin that ended with Harry standing behind the staggering Slytherin.

He grabbed Malfoy's right arm and with a sharp jerk and twist, swung the pale boy face first into the nearest wall. There was a sickening pop as Malfoy's shoulder dislocated, which merged with the loud cracks as his elbow, wrist, nose and jaw were broken all at once. Harry kept his left hand on the arm he was holding and snaked his right around Malfoy's throat and under his jaw.

***\*I was being sarcastic.\****

Harry looked over his shoulder at Crabbe and Goyle, who were both watching in stupid amazement. The pair took on look at him, another at the gagging and bleeding Malfoy, before turning on a knut and all but sprinting down the corridor. Harry turned his attention back to his victim, who was struggling weakly between him and the wall, which now had a large splattered smear of blood where Malfoy's face had impacted.

"It's official," he heard Ron breathe in a tone that suggested a mixture of amazement, fear and suppressed delight, "We've discovered something more dangerous than Ginny when she's pissed off."

"What's that?" asked Hermione, quietly.

Harry could not see it, but he could hear the smile, "Harry when he's pissed off."

The sharp click of booted footsteps on the stone floor drew everyone's attention to somebody coming down the corridor towards them. While Harry could not claim to recognise the magic auras of everyone at Hogwarts, this person was one he was eminently familiar with. Unfortunately.

*'This day just gets better and better.'*

"Finally decided to return have you, Potter?" Snape asked in an acid tone. His black robes were billowing as he came striding purposefully towards them. "It's about time as well, I've been waiting -

What on *earth* are you doing?"

Snape came to an abrupt halt, not a yard away from where Harry had Malfoy pressed up against the wall. His sallow face was a picture of disbelief as a light blue folded note which he was carrying slipped from his fingers and fluttered to the floor.

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"It's not what it looks like, Professor," Ginny tried to explain.

"I'm about to separate Malfoy's head from his body," declared Harry calmly, "It's a new kind of stress therapy I've invented. Want to try it?"

Never in all the years he had known the man had Harry seen the Potions Master look so utterly dumbstruck. He could not have achieved a similar effect if he had slapped Snape in the face with a freshly caught trout. For the first time Snape honestly seemed incapable of speaking, or in his case snapping, a coherent sentence.

*'I like him better this way. Think I could make it permanent?'*

**\*Not without significant behavioural modifications.\***

Snape finally found his voice, and his coherency, and bellowed at the top of his lungs, "Let him go this instant!"

Harry considered refusing for a moment, the prospect of decapitating Malfoy was tempting and right now he needed to relieve the stress. But after a moment, a very long moment, he decided that it would be less than appropriate. He was a Prefect after all, not that he had had much to do besides choose the password to Gryffindor Tower every so often.

Reluctantly, it was very tempting, Harry released Malfoy from his hold. Ignoring the way his fellow Prefect collapsed in a bloody heap, and ignoring Snape at the same time, Harry turned his attention downwards.

"Is that for me?" he asked, stooping to pick up the note Snape had dropped. It was addressed to him and he immediately recognised the handwriting as belonging to Dumbledore. Breaking the wax seal and unfolding the note, he read the few words that were there.

*'Well, there goes my chances of getting some rest right away.'*

"I'm expected in Professor Dumbledore's office," he told Ginny, Ron and Hermione, who had been nervously watching the exchange. The three of them shared a worried look at this, one was only summoned to Dumbledore's office in dire circumstances. Snape, however, seemed delighted.

"Perfect timing for your expulsion."

"Unfortunately, that will not be on the agenda," replied Harry, ignoring Snape's sneer, and handed the letter to the scowling professor so that he too could read what was written.

"Minister Fudge is here."

\*\*\*

Albus Dumbledore was not a man who angered quickly, primarily because he had great reserves of patience and because he very seldom needed to. Today, however, he was faced with something that was greatly trying his aforementioned patience and the situation regarding Voldemort and his resurrection could very easily be considered dire need.

Besides which, Cornelius Fudge was an absolute and complete idiot.

The Minister of Magic was also an exceptionally stubborn man, had been so even when he was one of Dumbledore's students when he was younger. Indeed he was so remarkably stubborn that his classmates, and even some of the teachers of the time, had nicknamed him "mule" by way of reference.

*'I should have expected he would only get worse with age,'* mused the headmaster.

On a good day, and in better times, Dumbledore would have found Fudge's mule-like stubbornness to not accept the blindingly obvious as somewhat amusing. But the better times had ended six months ago when Peter Pettigrew returned his master to a semblance of life. And after the events of last night, today was certainly anything but good.

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"Allow me to extend my congratulations, Cornelius," he rumbled, an inkling of his mounting frustration with the rotund Minister beginning to show in his voice and his words, "You have the singularly *most closed-off mind* that I have ever had the misfortune of encountering."

Before Fudge had time to begin looking insulted, if he ever figured it out, a muffled snort of amusement by the doorway drew their attention. Standing at the entrance to his office were Harry and Professor Snape, the former of which was smirking wryly while the latter alternately scowled at first the boy beside him and then at the recalcitrant Minister.

"Ah, Severus," he greeted, "I see you were able to deliver my message to Mr Potter."

Harry, looking exceptionally dirty save where he had apparently cast a very hurried cleaning charm on his face and hands, brushed passed Snape and stepped inside. "Sorry to keep you waiting, Albus," he said, fatigue weighing down his words, "I only just got back from the village."

Dumbledore nodded gravely, "Is it as bad as the reports?"

Raking his hands through his messy hair, Harry sighed volcanically, "Worse. I'd guess we're looking at between two and three hundred dead at the final count. The entire village resembles a battlefield, like something out of World War Two."

"Do not let it prey on you mind, Harry," he comforted, sensing the self recrimination the boy was wallowing in, "This attack came as a complete surprise to all of us. We had no warning."

Harry was literally seething and raked his hands through his hair again. His entire posture spoke volumes of frustration that exceeded even Dumbledore's at the moment. Without warning the young man whirled at Snape with a vengeance, "Dammit, man, you're supposed to be the bloody spy. Why

the hell didn't *you know* Voldemort was going to do this?"

Snape was so livid at being on the receiving end of Harry's outburst that his normally sallow skin was almost a normal rosy pink. His teeth ground audibly together and his reply came grated through a clenched jaw, "The dark lord does not fully trust me, Potter. Apparently I've *saved your life* once too often! He and the others are not convinced of my loyalty."

"What are you waiting for then? Convince him!" insisted Harry, making expressive gestures with his hands as he faced down his professor. Considering his normally restrained manner of speech, this was an even further indication of how upset Harry was.

"The best way for me to convince Lord Voldemort of my loyalty would be to throw you off the top of the Astronomy Tower!" Snape replied waspishly, teeth bared.

"I'll keep that in mind," growled Harry, staring into the other's eyes.

Dumbledore watched the exchange of harsh words with almost a trace of amusement. After the last hour spent trying to convince Fudge to accept the Voldemort had returned, this by-play between the two was a welcome relief. The Minister, he noticed out the corner of his eye, seemed quite put out by the interruption and also a tad nervous.

Harry ran a hand through his hair again, it was becoming practically a nervous tic, and heaved a deep sigh before declaring, "I need a drink."

"Perhaps some tea would sooth all our nerves," suggested Dumbledore, conjuring up a silver platter and a tea set.

"I was hoping for something stronger," admitted Harry, but was already pouring the steaming liquid into the cups and handing them out.

While Harry was pouring the tea Fudge finally found his voice and resumed his bleating refusals to admit Voldemort had returned.

"Really Dumbledore, you're going too far!" he protested pompously, "You-Know-Who is not back and will never be back! This is just an isolated incident! Some dissident warlocks trying to frighten us!"

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"Off hand I'd say they've succeeded," commented Harry, handing first Dumbledore and then Fudge a cup of steaming tea. "A lot of people died last night Minister. The Dark Mark has risen into the skies of England once again."

"Your failure to accept Voldemort's return bloodies your hands as much as the Death Eaters that were involved in the attack," snarled Snape, standing by the fireplace.

Fudge took a sip of his tea and returned Snape's glare, albeit not as fiercely. He took another sip and then wagged a finger at Dumbledore. "Don't try and lay the blame on me! Oh no, Albus! Don't for a moment think I'm going to believe the ramblings of this vagabond delinquent of yours. I don't think so."

Harry had moved to the window looking out over the lake. Staring outside, seemingly lost in thought, he said, "It doesn't matter what you think anymore, Minister. Voldemort is back, whether you admit it or not, you cannot change the fact."

"Really?" sneered the small man, his teacup rattling against the saucer. He picked it up and took long sip, his expression clearly speaking his thoughts about Harry's credibility.

"Really," Harry agreed, sipping at his own cup of tea. "And you'll be telling the *Daily Prophet* exactly that this afternoon. You will make sure that tomorrow's edition of the paper gives full details about last night's attack. You will publicly acknowledge that Voldemort has returned. You will begin implementing plans to counter the threat of his Death Eaters, making particular note to protect Muggle-borns and half-bloods, starting with the deployment of a full division of aurors as additional security for Hogwarts."

*'Sensible suggestions, but he will never comply.'*

Fudge was glaring viciously at the black haired boy, who was looking out the window with his back to them all. He took another large sip of his drink and then asked in a snide voice, "And what, exactly, makes you think I'd do all that, Mr Potter?"

After a moment's thought Harry turned to face them, his eyes strangely subdued, "Because I asked nicely and, if you want to save innocent lives, you will do it."

Fudge finished his tea with a gulp and set the cup down on Dumbledore's desk, snorting at what he perceived as Harry's naivety.

*'So stubborn.'*

"And if you don't do exactly what I tell you to; you'll be dead within a month."

Not even Dumbledore had seen that coming and Fudge had most certainly not. Snape, who had been leaning against the wall by the fire was so startled by Harry's perfectly calm pronouncement that he slipped to one side and almost fell flat on his face. Harry for his part suddenly had a gleam in his eyes that Dumbledore found entirely fascinating.

Fudge looked at Harry through narrowed eyes and asked, in what for him was a dangerous voice, "Are you *threatening* to kill me, Potter?"

"I'm not making a threat, Minister," replied Harry, calmly sipping his tea. "And I'm not the one who's going to kill you. If anything is going to kill you it will be the poison I put in your tea that you just finished."

*'Holy shit!'*

This time Snape did slip and fell on his ass with a loud thump. Fudge dropped his bowler hat, which he had just picked up, and turned a very uncomplimentary shade of green. Dumbledore gazed at Harry in open astonishment for a moment before looking with concern at his own tea cup.

The Boy Who Lived apparently saw where Dumbledore was looking and figured out he thoughts on the matter. Normally getting a read on what Dumbledore was thinking was exceptionally difficult, something he prided himself on, but these circumstances were unlike most others. "Don't worry, headmaster," Harry assured him, "Minister Fudge's tea was the only cup I laced."

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"P-poison?" stuttered Fudge, his face now a sickly paste colour, "This- this is an outrage! I-I-I-I'll have your head for this, Potter! You won't get away with this!"

"I've *already* gotten away with it," said Harry, continuing to peaceably sip his tea as though they were discussing the weather rather than matters of cloak and dagger, "The moment you drank from that cup you lost any choice in the matter. Entirely."

Fudge turned to Dumbledore, then Snape, with budging eyes and a desperate expression, "I'm the Minister of Magic! I can get the best mediwizards and potion brewers in the world."

Harry interrupted sharply, "Have you ever heard of *Set's Bride*?"

Dumbledore certainly had not, and apparently neither had Fudge, but from his reaction it was clear that Snape knew what Harry was talking about, "But that potion's a myth! A legend!"

"I *am* a legend. Who better to make it?"

"Indeed. But what exactly is this 'Set's Bride', Harry?" asked Dumbledore, setting back in his chair with interest. This meeting with Fudge was no longer as frustrating as it had been.

Snape had begun pacing about, his black robes whipping around him, "It's an ancient Egyptian poison used thousands of years ago by the pharaohs. It gave the brewer complete control of anyone that it was used on."

Dumbledore was thoroughly alarmed by this news and for good reason, the implications were more than a little alarming. Fudge seemed to understand something similar and spoke out his thoughts about the subject, expecting that he had just found a way out of his predicament.

"Like the Imperious Curse!" he shouted at Harry with a gleam in his eye, "I'll have you in Azkaban before sunset for this!"

"Hardly, I think," replied Harry, draining his tea, "Set's Bride does not control the mind, Professor Snape's explanation was somewhat lacking in detail. You see; people who have been poisoned with Set's Bride must do everything the poisoner tells them, because if they don't he, or she, won't continue making the poison for them."

*'Ah, so that is how it works. Quite ingenious. I wish I had thought of it.'*

Fudge was not as intellectually keen as Dumbledore and required further explanation, "What are you babbling about? Why on earth would I want *more* poison?"

"Because if you don't you will be dead in thirty three days," explained Harry, "The poison is perfectly harmless and aside from a headache or two you won't even know you drank it. You see Set's Bride only kills when it is flushed out of your system, which takes thirty three days. If you don't take another dose of it before then, it will kill you. Quite painfully too."

"Headaches, dizziness, cramps, stomach pains, difficulty breathing and then you die," listed Snape in a dry voice, appearing to actually be enjoying himself. "From what few records and documents exist it takes about six hours."

"Eight actually," corrected Harry, pouring himself another cuppa, "But the first two are very mild, so don't really count I suppose."

Fudge had become a pale green once more and had dropped limbless into the nearest chair, hand clutched to his chest. "B-but- but- there must be an antidote!" he breathed raggedly, looking at Snape for an answer.

Snape's eyes narrowed and he looked at Harry with what could almost be interpreted as respect, "Yes, but that's the beauty of the poison. Both it and the antidote require eleven drops of blood and a tear from the poisoner in their brewing ingredients. The catch is that they all have to be supplied *willingly* - you can't *force* someone to make the poison or the antidote. If you try, you'll be dead before you finish swallowing."

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"Which means, Minister," Harry laid it out bare before the man, "You will do everything I say, how I say and when I say. I'm the only person alive who knows exactly how to brew Set's Bride. If you value your life, you'd best get cracking."

Fudge was rubbing at his temple with a hand, obviously feeling the onset of a headache, from either the situation or the poison Dumbledore could not tell. Still, it presented the perfect opportunity to spur the man on.

"Feeling a *headache* coming on, Cornelius?" he asked.

The blood drained from Fudge's face and he shot to his feet, just in time for Harry to calmly pass him his bowler hat. "If tomorrow's *Daily Prophet* meets with our approval, we'll send you an owl informing you when you can come back for another dose of death. Good day, Minister."

Fudge's mouth was working, opening and closing rapidly, but no words came out. He clutched his hat so tightly Dumbledore feared the fabric would soon rend. The man was clearly at his wits end and was swaying unsteadily on his feet.

"I suggest you leave now, Cornelius," he told the Minister, "I hope you don't mind if we do not see you out, but I believe you know the way."

"Y-y-yes. Yes, I-I'll be off," Fudge swallowed and hurried out the office, "I-I need to set up a meeting with the press. R-right away."

The office door slammed shut and Dumbledore, Snape and Harry waited in silence, listening until his

footsteps on the stairwell faded away. When they could no longer hear him the two adults turned to Harry, who was looking after the departed Minister with a bemused smile. Neither could find anything to say and they remained that way for several minutes.

"You should have been in Slytherin!" blurted Snape, sounding appalled by idea.

"The Sorting Hat suggested it," replied Harry, raising an eyebrow.

Dumbledore shook his head, both amused and concerned at his young friend's actions. "I'll admit this was an aid to our cause, Harry," he said gravely, "But *poisoning* the Minister..."

Harry looked at him strangely, "What poison? Just a little applied psychology, a small wandless headache charm on the tea and some carefully generated paranoia. Nothing more."

"A bluff?"

Dumbledore almost fell out of his plush seat at this revelation. Snape dropped into one like a stone, and both men gave the grime covered boy an amazed look. Harry grinned impishly at them.

"A bluff?" repeated Snape, looking dumbstruck.

Harry shrugged, "Set's Bride takes two hundred and twenty two hours and twenty two minutes and twenty two seconds to brew. Since I don't have any on hand, making Fudge think I did seemed like a viable option.

"A bluff," repeated Snape, amazed.

"And a very clever one at that," confirmed Dumbledore, smiling benevolently at Harry, "We don't even need to really poison the Minister. Once he has made an official press release confirming Voldemort's return, the public will be able to keep him in line for us. After making a statement such as that he cannot simply retract it."

Harry smirked and nodded, "Piece of cake."

Before they could continue to discuss the virtues and merits of tricking the Minister of Magic into thinking he had been poisoned, the door to the office burst open. Remus Lupin pushed his way inside at almost a dead run, breathing heavily and his face red with exertion.

"Remus? What is it?" asked Dumbledore, rising behind his desk.

Lupin took a deep breath before answering, "Azkaban..."

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"I wish Harry were back."

Ginny looked at her brother, sitting on the couch with Hermione. The bushy haired girl gave him a pat on the knee and said in a comforting voice, "He'll be here soon, Ron."

Ron shook his head sadly, "I've really missed him since Halloween. I hardly got a chance to talk properly with him yesterday."

"Don't worry, Ron," assured Hermione, patting his knee again, "As soon as he's finished talking with Dumbledore he'll be back. We can get a proper explanation then."

"That's not it," protested Ron, "I'm not talking about apparating on Hogwarts grounds."

Hermione looked slightly put off, Ginny noted with amusement. After all, Harry had accomplished something consider impossible last night. Once Hermione got into full research mode, like she was now, it was almost equally impossible to distract her.

"Don't get me wrong, Mione. You're a great friend and I don't know how I would've survived the last couple of months without you to talk to but," Ron wavered and wave his hands about, "It's just... well, I can talk to Harry about... well... guy stuff. I can't do that with you."

"Guy stuff?" asked Hermione, sounding surprised. Her eyes narrowed at the implied challenge that she wouldn't be up to such a task, "I can do that."

"Ha ha. No."

Hermione scowled and insisted, "*I can!* Come on, try me."

Ron looked at her uncertainly, "You sure you want to try?"

"Of course," Hermione asserted, folding her arms across her chest and glaring at him.

Ron bit his bottom lip, gnawing uneasily at the flesh. He looked around the common room, checking to see if anyone could overhear. Then he looked at Ginny, who shrugged, and then turned back to Hermione, who was waiting impatiently. Ron sighed and propped his chin in a hand, seeming lost in thought for a moment, almost daydreaming.

Finally he looked at the waiting girl beside him and asked in a perfectly bland, yet earnest voice,

"Hermione's got great tits, don't you think?"

Ginny coughed and stared at her brother incredulously, amazed that Ron had actually said that to the girl everyone knew he had a severe crush on. Hermione sat perfectly still, her face amazing Ginny by cycling through an amazingly wide variety of blushes of varying intensity.

*'Who knew a person could turn so many different shades of red?'*

"Ooooh-kay," Hermione finally said, her face now almost the exact same red as Ron's hair, "Back to the matter at hand."

She shot to her feet, as if launched from a cannon, and hurried across the common room and ran up the stairs leading to the girl's dormitories. As she disappeared from sight, closely watched the entire time by Ron, he commented absently, "You know, you have to admire her. Barking mad some times, but when she sets her mind on something..."

"It's not her *mind* you're admiring," replied Ginny with a smirk.

Ron thought about it for a moment before nodding, "True."

Less than a minute passed when Hermione came bounding back down the stairs, a truly massive book floating in the air behind her. Ginny recognised it immediately as the book Harry had been seen

reading every now and again since they returned from school. He too, despite his greatly improved physique, used Levitation Charms whilst reading it.

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Hermione, studiously avoiding Ron's twinkling blue eyes, swung the book around as she reached them and dropped it heavily on the study table they were sitting near. The wooden table groaned loudly in protest, its legs creaking ominously. There was a series of loud cracks, reminding Ginny of when Harry had broken several of Malfoy's bones a few hours earlier. Then, with a puff of sawdust, the legs snapped and the table crashed to the floor with a loud bang.

"Holy shit!" exclaimed Ron, jumping back.

"Um... oops?" supplied Hermione, looking with an uncertain expression at the table on the floor, the massive book resting on its collapsed top.

Ron stared at her, "You broke table. You *broke* the bloody table!"

Hermione replied in a squeaky voice, "I didn't mean to!"

"What *is* that thing, anyway?" asked Ron, crouching down to look.

"It's a book, dear brother," Ginny supplied, unable to resist the tease.

He looked up at her in exasperation, "I know that. I meant, what book is it?"

"Harry gave it to me for Christmas," said Hermione, brushing a thick layer of dust off the cover and showing them the title.

Every Spell, Curse, Hex and Charm Ever Written, Spoken and Otherwise

From the Beginning of Time Through Till Next Week Tuesday

By the Order of the Phoenix

"The Order of the Phoenix?" Ginny read aloud, her voice slightly higher pitched than usual.

Hermione nodded, "I don't know who they are. There's nothing in the index about them."

Ginny frowned at the book, which the other girl now had floating in the air at about waist height. She couldn't be sure, but she was willing to bet a her allowance for the year that this was the same mysterious Order of the Phoenix Harry had inducted her into at the beginning of the school year.

"Harry's got a *lot* of explanations to give," she muttered, drawing a curious glance from Hermione, who was now trying to repair the broken table.

"And you'll get them."

Harry was pulling himself through the portrait hole, exceptionally troubled, even more so than he had in the Great Hall after returning from Hogwarts. Ron and Hermione were by his side almost before he had fully entered the common room.

"But not right away," he continued, "There's thing I have to do first. I'll explain everything to everyone involved when school starts again. After the first PFT class of the new term."

"Why the wait?" asked Hermione.

Harry looked at her and crossed over to the couch she and Ron had been sitting on earlier, "The shit has hit the fan. Dumbledore's called all of his 'agents' together for a meeting to discuss the situation and prepare for it."

"Fan?" asked Ron, failing to understand.

"It's a Muggle thing," Ginny supplied, watching as Harry sank down onto the couch, "What is it, Harry? From the look on your face I know it's more than the attack on Hogsmeade."

"The Dementors have abandoned Azkaban. They've sided with Voldemort."

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## 15. The Facts of the Matter

Dinner in the Great Hall was as superb a feast as always, although the conversation was quieter than it had been before the Christmas holidays. Ever since the attack on Hogsmeade the children had been somewhat muted during mealtimes, though today things had picked up a bit.

Hermione supposed that was because today had been the first day of classes for the new term and everyone was either discussing how good it was to be working again, or complaining about the amount of work that had already been laid down for them.

"You see, I have trouble with Potions," Ron was telling her, trying as usual to get her to help him with his homework by way of getting her to do it for him.

"Which part?" she asked, expecting him to immediately mention Snape.

Much to her surprise Ron did not begin complaining about the Slytherin head of house and instead shook his head mournfully, "The potions part. I'm hopeless."

Rolling her eyes Hermione frowned disapprovingly at him. How he was ever going to manage to pass his O.W.L.s at this rate she did not know. "If you're that hopeless," she asked, "why are you asking me for help?"

"You're like a textbook with legs," he replied earnestly.

"Really," she cocked an eyebrow his way and waited until he lifted his goblet of pumpkin juice to his lips before continuing, "And here I thought you were only interesting in my tits."

For a moment Hermione was worried that perhaps her timing had been a bit off and Ron was going to choke to death. He certainly was shocked though and after spluttering and coughing and making a wide range of obscure gestures, Ginny hitting him hard across his back, he managed to gape at her and turn a very fetching shade of crimson.

*'Brings out his hair. And his eyes.'*

Still coughing lightly Ron looked around to check if anyone else had heard, but conversation around the table continued without pause. Turning back to her he stared with a completely horrified expression and asked, "Did you *have* to say *that* right when I was drinking?"

"Course she did," grinned Ginny, clapping him on the shoulder, "It's more funny that way."

"Funny? She could've killed me!" he protested.

Checking her watch, Hermione rose from her seat and motioned to the door, "Come on, it's almost time for Harry's class. You can complain on the way."

Most of the other Gryffindors were up and making towards the third floor corridor as Hermione, Ron and Ginny left the Great Hall. The first, second and third years split off from the group before they reached the corridor, heading back to Gryffindor tower. As they left Hermione could hear Moira loudly complaining that it wasn't fair that only fourth-years and above got a chance to attend PFT, something the boisterous second-year did every time.

*'A good thing too; she's dangerous enough as it is.'*

Climbing down the winding staircase leading down from Fluffy's old lair, the students made their way into the Practical Fighting Techniques auditorium. As the trio took their seats, Hermione noticed that there was a large attendance of Slytherins for some reason, which was very odd as less than a dozen of that house took the class with any regularity.

"What do they know that we don't?" muttered Ginny, eyeing them narrowly.

*'Nothing good I'll bet.'*

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"You don't think Harry's going to tell *all* of us, do you?" asked Ron, pointing to where The Boy Who Lived was standing on the stage, waiting for all the students to enter.

This was the primary reason why Hermione, Ron and Ginny were so eager. Harry had promised them a forthcoming explanation, the day after Christmas, which he was to give them after finishing the first PFT class of the new term. That was tonight.

"I don't think so, Ron," she told him, but not sounding entirely certain. Looking around the auditorium Hermione saw that almost every teacher in the school was present for tonight's class.

*'Perhaps Harry's going to be explaining everything to them as well,'* she thought, nudging Ron and Ginny with her elbows and directing them to where Professor Lupin was entering the auditorium with Snuffles trotting along beside him.

"Snuffles is here?" asked Ron quietly.

"Harry wasn't kidding when he said everyone involved," agreed Ginny.

Harry was still on the stage and appeared to be playing a game of chess against himself at his desk, to one side of the stage. It was a slow moving game and Harry was shifting his pieces with less rapidity than he usually did when playing Ron. By now all the students that attended PFT were in their seats, along with the teachers and a disturbing amount of Slytherins. They sat in silence, watching Harry play, and waited for him to begin.

And waited.

And waited.

Impatient mutters and hushed whispers slowly began to make themselves heard. Harry had remained sitting at his desk, playing his game of chess, for nearly twenty minutes after when the class was scheduled to begin. He seemed completely unaware of their presence and continued to play on with an almost bored expression.

*'The natives are getting restless,'* Hermione thought as Dean and Seamus shifted in their seats behind where she was sitting.

"Patience is a virtue," Harry suddenly said, not looking up from his game. "You will find it impossible to live your entire lives where everything you want is instantly brought to you. At some point or another, you will have to sit... and wait."

Everyone was completely silent and focused on Harry now, whispers and mutterings forgotten. His voice had been perfectly calm and inflectionless, yet somehow he managed to make everybody feel like scolded three year olds.

*'How does he do that?'*

They watched quietly as Harry used his white bishop to remove a black knight, moving the pieces with his hands since he was not using a Wizard Chess set. A minute or so passed, everyone still watching the seated boy closely, before he made his next move. He reached out a hand and with a flourish tipped the black knight over, ending the game.

"Damned if I saw that coming," muttered Ron, who had been following the game closely for the last ten minutes.

Pushing his chair back Harry rose from behind his desk, revealing that he was not dressed in the usual black Hogwarts robes, but was wearing instead his father's trenchrobe. As he slowly made his way to the centre of the stage, where the lecturer's podium was rising up, his eyes swung to his friends and he smiled thinly.

*'He looks... reluctant?'*

With an inaudible sigh Harry took his place behind the podium, resting his hands on it as he swept the auditorium and those sitting before him with a glance. His next words were ones that Hermione had never imagined she would ever hear Harry say out loud. Let alone willingly.

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"I believe I owe Draco Malfoy an apology."

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"Damned if I saw *that* coming!"

Ron couldn't help but mutter the words as Harry's proclamation dropped upon the students like a bellowing Hippogriff with toothache. Or should that be beak-ache? He'd have to remember to ask Hermione about that later, but right now the youngest of the six Weasley boys merely sat in his seat in

disbelieving horror.

"Merlin, he looks like Snape would if he ever had to give Gryffindor points," muttered Seamus, from behind him, sounding disgusted that Harry was actually apologising to Malfoy.

"What I wouldn't give to wipe the smirk of that smarmy git's face," growled Fred, sitting further along. Ron turned to look where his brother was scowling and found his own face contorting in anger. Malfoy was sitting amongst his fellow Slytherins and, for the first time since Harry had beaten him to a pulp, appeared abhorrently smug. He looked almost precisely as he had done when taunting Harry the day of the disaster.

*'I'll hold him down for you, brother.'*

"Well, Harry did go a bit overboard," admitted Hermione with obvious reluctance. "He's lucky an apology's all he has to do. The school board could have very easily revoked his Prefect status."

"Extenuating circumstances!" protested George, looking just as angry as his twin.

Harry in the meanwhile had remained shock still where he had been standing, waiting patiently for them to settle back down. After a minute or two, when some semblance of quiet had been achieved, he gave a sharp nod that was followed by an oddly humorous seeming shrug.

"It has been brought to my attention," he began in a tone of voice Ron could not immediately identify, "that my actions on the day of the Hogsmeade attack were somewhat... inappropriate, especially for a Hogwarts Prefect."

*'Slimy bugger deserved it for what he said.'*

"We had been discussing the victims of the attack and, if I remember correctly, Mr Malfoy had said something to the effect of, *'I hope they were all Mudbloods or Muggle lovers'*."

This time the mutters and whispers that broke out were ones of outrage and Malfoy quickly found himself under the fierce glares of every single Gryffindor present, as well as almost all of the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. Ron was pleased to see that the pale boy's smug smile had abruptly turned upside down and the rest of the Slytherins weren't looking that pleased any more either.

"I'm afraid I let my temper get the better of me," Harry explained, Ron now recognising the condescending tone in his friend's voice. It was not one he usually heard from Harry which was why he had not recognized it sooner.

"In the haze of my anger," continued Harry as though discussing a topic from History of Magic, "I inflicted grievous bodily harm on Mr Malfoy. I believe Madam Pomfrey listed the injuries as a broken collar bone, broken wrist and elbow, a broken nose, a broken jaw - in two places and three teeth knocked out. Oh yes, I'm afraid I also dislocated his shoulder at the same time."

*'Ah... wish I had a photo of the moment.'*

Malfoy was now looking quite livid, his cheeks flushed a bright pink and his cold grey eyes were burning with open hatred. The rest of the Slytherins seemed equally infuriated, with the sole exception being Blaise Zabini, who oddly enough seemed amused by it all. Craning his head around Ron could see that Snape also wasn't looking all that happy with the delivery of Harry's apology.

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As for the rest; Dumbledore, sitting not far from the Potions Master had a highly bemused look in his eyes and his long silver moustache was twitching as he fought a grin. Ron couldn't make out Sirius' expression, he was a dog after all, but Lupin quite frankly looked delighted with how things were proceeding.

"Fortunately Madam Pomfrey was able to repair the damage with a minimum of fuss," summed up Harry, now smiling sweetly at Malfoy. "Still, I would like to offer my most sincere apologies to Mr Malfoy and assure him that I have learnt my lesson."

The lecturing podium swiftly sank back into the floor as Harry gave a short bow towards Malfoy. A few words drifted gently to all their ears, sounding as though spoken in jest, but clearly laden with a warning.

"Next time I'll be certain to remember to use my wand and not my hands."

The Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws twittered with amusement, much to the Slytherins displeasure and one or two of the students even applauded lightly. Harry had apologised for his slightly over the top behaviour, but had also made it perfectly clear that he would repeat it if Malfoy stepped out of line again.

*'Good one, Harry.'*

"Well then," Harry smiled and clapped his hands eagerly together, "Now that the trivialities are out of the way; on to business."

*'Trivial? Oh, Malfoy's not going to like being called that!'*

His eyes roamed over the body of students and teachers who were sitting about the large room, a dangerous gleam burning in his bright green eyes. This was something Ron was very well acquainted with, he saw it far too often for his liking.

Usually it was right before Harry dragged Hermione and him into some damned foolish adventure that just as usually ended up with one or more of them in the Hospital Wing.

"I think it would be a nice change of pace," Harry told them, grinning impishly, "if tonight's lesson were to be a bit more... laid back than usual. Perhaps a friendly duel between myself and a... volunteer? Anyone?"

Not a single hand or voice was raised. Everyone present knew all too well that going down onto the stage with Harry almost always resulted in a visit to Madam Pomfrey. After a few seconds of silence, everyone was a bit surprised when Draco Malfoy rose to his feet, apparently intent on finding satisfaction since Harry's mock apology had not supplied it.

"I need an opponent, Malfoy," Harry noted with a tinge of sarcasm, "Not a sacrificial lamb."

Before Malfoy could respond or anyone else could volunteer the light clicking of a heel against the stone steps descending to the stage drew everyone's attention. There, moving swiftly down the centre aisle, was Ginny. She strode onto the stage with the assuredness of a tigress, her flaming locks free from the usual loose ponytail and cascading down passed her shoulders.

Harry was grinning broadly, his bright green eyes alight with eager anticipation. As Ginny came to a halt about five yards away, he waved towards his desk with his wand. A pair of sheathed swords rose up into the air and glided silently to the two, one coming to rest before each of them.

"So, how d'you want to play it?" Harry asked, plucking his sword from the air.

"You feeling adventurous?" Ginny asked back, her deep brown eyes full of challenge.

Harry's grin grew even broader, "Always."

Ginny's smile was a feral one and Ron was immediately glad that it was Harry down there opposite her and not himself.

"First blood."

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Gasps echoed throughout the auditorium as everyone heard Ginny set the rules for the upcoming duel of wits and steel. Several students and teachers even rose to their feet, trying to protest, but their companions forcibly hauled them back down before they could interrupt.

Harry, if possible, seemed to be enjoying this and nodded his acceptance. "Stakes?" he asked, as he slowly drew his Katana from its sheath.

"Winner gets whatever he or she wants," replied Ginny, drawing her own blade.

"If that's the case," admitted Harry with a mischievous smile, "I'm almost tempted to throw the match."

*'How in the name of Hades can they be flirting now?'*

The two opponents slid into what Ron assumed were ready stances, swords held lightly in one hand. From the chess board on Harry's desk one of the white knights lifted up and floated across the stage to hover in the air between the two.

"When the knight drops; we begin," explained Harry as the chess piece rose up above them, near the auditorium's high ceiling.

Ginny nodded her agreement, eyes never once straying from where Harry was standing, waiting. A veil of complete silence fell over those watching, anxious anticipation bubbling within them. Long moments passed as Harry and Ginny faced off, ready launch at each other in an instant.

And then, in complete silence, the knight fell from where it had been hanging in the air and dropped to the floor of the stage.

Over a dozen blows were exchanged before it landed.

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It defied belief to watch.

This was not a mock duel or even a friendly competition. It couldn't have been. Even with the slightly enhanced reflexes and perceptions that came with being a werewolf, Remus Lupin was having trouble following the fight.

Everyone had heard about the first swordfight Harry and Ginny had participated in, right after the school year began, Lupin had queried Ron and Hermione about it one afternoon. But from what they had said that had been a simple sparring match, with Harry clearly being the superior of the two, coaching Ginny more than anything else.

*'This is several notches higher.'*

For the passed quarter hour the auditorium had been filled with the clash of steel against steel and the flash of blades under the torchlight. Everyone watching had been silent at first, sitting perfectly still and watching as Harry and Ginny put on a display the likes of which none of them had ever seen before.

After a few minutes the students, then the teachers, had gotten into the spirit of things and begun cheering the two on. The split between the supporters was fairly even, although what bets Lupin saw being exchanged seemed to favour Harry as the victor. He was pretty certain that less money was wagered during a Quidditch game than at this moment.

Watching closely Lupin thought that the fighting style the two used was a complimentary blend of simple and intricate techniques. The blades licked in and out, sometimes so fast the only way to know a move had been made was by listening for the sound. Harry and Ginny were dancing around each other, their weapons constantly weaving around and about between them.

And then there were the spells. After a few minutes, about the time the cheering had started, Harry and Ginny had progressed the duel into something beyond the simple swordfight Lupin had been expecting it to be. Even if what it was was already something more than simple. Now it was combined with a magical duel where spells and curses and hexes were exchanged almost as rapidly as sword strokes.

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It should have been impossible for either of them to dodge or deflect all the spells and still keep the blades moving. Somehow they did it anyway. After a flurry of clashing strokes Harry swung his sword in a wide arc as he hopped back a couple of yards, casting a simple disarming spell at Ginny with his wand.

Ginny jabbed her wand at the floor beneath her and was airborne before the spell reached her, cleaving harmlessly under her feet. Her magically assisted jump must have easily cleared five or more yards at its apex and then she came dropping down on Harry like an eagle diving on its prey. Harry spun out of

the way and Ginny's sword sank to the hilt into the stone floor, leaving her momentarily defenceless.  
'*He has her now; she's wide open.*'

Harry was about to slash at her from where he was standing, but a tall shadow suddenly loomed over him. He jumped into a forward roll, coming to his feet and spinning around to face what had snuck up behind him. There, standing a good seven feet tall, clad in plate mail and a cloak that billowed behind him, was a literal knight in shining armour. Held in his right hand was a large broadsword and in his left was grasped an equally large battle axe. His helmeted head, with a plume of Weasley red feathers was turned towards Harry.

For a moment The Boy Who Lived seemed completely nonplussed by the sight and he blinked with surprise before a calculating look crossed his face. Harry glanced passed the slowly advancing knight to where Ginny was standing, just succeeding in pulling her sword free.

"You transfigured the chess piece?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow at her and completely ignoring the closing automaton.

Ginny grinned at him and saluted with her sword, "You were feeling adventurous, remember?"

'*I didn't even see her change it.*' wondered Lupin, glancing at McGonagall, who seemed quite at a loss for words. Transfiguration on such a level was definitely *not* in the syllabus for a fourth-year student such as Ginny.

Harry grinned in return just as the knight reached him, swinging its sword at his head, but he was no longer there. Lupin was positive that Harry had not used his wand, but somehow Harry's jump backwards was even higher and further reaching than Ginny's had been. As he sailed up and away from the knight, Harry hurled his sword at the knight in a single smooth motion. The chess piece fell to the floor a moment later, the Katana buried clear through its armoured head, and after a moment flickered back into its original form; a tiny white knight.

Landing lightly on his feet and in a low crouch, Harry looked up at Ginny, who seemed pleased that her opponent was now separated from his sword. But her grin only lasted for a second when, with a tangible wave of power emanating him, Harry grinned wickedly back at her and laid his hands on the floor before him.

"*Acciando Dementisoria Servaantis!*"

With a cry that sounded like damned souls, twin pillars of inky blackness arose to either side of Harry, quickly solidifying into tall and cloaked, discernable forms that sent chills up the spines of everyone that saw.

It was a pair of Dementors.

Strangely though Lupin could not feel the customary coldness that was a Dementors companion, nor did anyone else for the sound of things. Another unearthly wail sounded, just as unnerving as the first time, and the black shadows began gliding across the stage towards Ginny. For a moment the girl seemed frozen to the spot, unsure what to do or how to respond, but then she leapt into the air.

"Expecto Patronus!" she shouted aiming her wand at the one Dementor, while dropping down before the other. It should have been impossible for a simple sword to injure, let alone destroy, a Dementor, but Ginny apparently knew something everyone else did not. Her Katana flashed back and forth in a blur of gleaming steel, cleaving through the Dementor's black robes a dozen times in quick succession.

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The Dementor threw its shrouded hands up as it was rent asunder and howled terribly as it fell apart in a shower of shadows that faded in the light. Ginny ignored its death cries and spun to the remaining Dementor, which was struggling helplessly in a web of misty silver and gold that emerged from her wand. Her Patronus was clearly unpractised, but still held enough power to hold the creature back and immobile as she leaned into it.

As the last Dementor, which was obviously not a real Dementor, exploded into shards of nothing, Lupin saw that Harry had retrieved his own sword. He was standing opposite Ginny, waiting for her to finish, his eyes blazing with excitement as she whirled to face him.

The two came together in the centre of the stage, abandoning the use of spells entirely and obviously intent on finishing their duel with nought but their swords. The blades were almost singing as they slashed through the air, moving so fast they were little more than curves of light in Harry and Ginny's hands.

'*Sweet Merlin, they're going to kill each other at this rate!*'

There was a sudden explosive flurry of blows that came to a head. Ginny had exchanged a few blinding thrusts and parries with Harry, eventually swinging her sword up and down as if she were trying to split him right down the middle. It was then that Harry deliberately cast his sword aside, Ginny's Katana swooping down unchecked towards his head.

**SMACK!**

'*Good. God.*'

Harry's hands had arced up and in, catching and halting the descending blade between his open palms at the very last second. They stood there for a long moment, completely immobile, like a stone or bronze cast statue. Then with a jerk Harry twisted Ginny's sword to one side, pivoting on one foot and planting the other into her stomach with a powerful side kick.

They spun away from each other, robes billowing about them, Harry's discarded sword leaping up from where it lay and into his hand. The blades flickered in the light as they passed within inches of each other, twirling around to face off when they were several yards apart.

"Game over," declared Harry, sounding a bit out of breath but happy.

"Yeah," puffed Ginny, still holding her sword up and at the ready.

Harry grinned wickedly, "Looks like I won."

Ginny looked at him as if he were off his rocker, "How do you figure that?"

"First blood," he replied, pointing at her left bicep. There on her arm, through a small cut in her robes, was a tiny nick. Ginny glanced down at her arm and swore quite colourfully, though Remus doubted anyone other than himself and Harry heard her.

The redhead looked challengingly at Harry and smirked, "We'll need a rematch then."

"A rematch?" asked Harry, looking puzzled, "What d'you mean?"

Ginny grinned happily and pointed at his left thigh. A small slash ran through the tight cloth of his jeans and a thin line of red lay upon his skin. Harry looked down at himself and then back at Ginny, eyebrow cresting near his hairline.

"First blood," confirmed Ginny, straightening up and lowering her sword.

They began circling around each other, swords still in hand but not raised, their eyes never straying from the others. Lupin noted with some amusement that they were slowly spiralling in towards each other and would soon be meeting at the centre of the stage.

"Those mock Dementors were a nice touch," complimented Ginny.

"Thanks, that transfigured knight was certainly a novel trick," returned Harry, his sword now trailing behind him, its tip gently scraping against the stone floor.

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The two of them were less than a yard apart now and continued to slowly circle around, eyes firmly locked upon the other. Both were still breathing heavily and seemed completely oblivious to the presence of everyone else. Finally they drew to a halt, close together, Harry towering a good six inches above Ginny, causing her to tilt her head back to look into his face.

"So... if we both win..." said Harry, huskily.

"We both... get what we want," agreed Ginny, breathlessly.

Both were grinning broadly and Lupin noticed that Harry was leaning slightly in towards Ginny, his head bent at an angle suggesting exactly what he had in mind.

*'I don't believe it,' he thought, 'He's going to kiss her!'*

"Ahem."

The air seemed to ripple around the two as their gazes snapped away from each other and locked onto the source of the cleared throat. There was a resounding crack, like splintering wood, and the stone tiles beneath them cracked open in a spider web of fine lines. Clearly the couple did *not* like being interrupted.

Dumbledore had risen to his feet and, once he had gotten everyone's attention, began to clap his hands together. "Bravo! Bravo!" he announced, soon joined by most of the audience in applauding a very flushed looking Harry and Ginny. Whether it was the attention or the smouldering chemistry that caused them to blush was anybody's guess.

"What is it with the Potter men and redheads?" Remus muttered to Snuffles, who shook his canine head as they watched the couple take a small bow.

After bowing to their audience and then again to each other, the two sheathed their swords and then Harry handed his weapon to Ginny. As the young girl carried the weapons back to where they had been stored, Harry pulled off his trenchrobe and draped it over the back of his chair. The grey t-shirt he was wearing, stretched tight across his chest, was darkened with sweat on the front and back from his exertions.

*'Is he trying to start a riot?'* Lupin wondered, noticing the sudden interest and whisperings that had suddenly enveloped all the ladies present. He sincerely hoped the slight intake and hitch of breath he had heard from Professors McGonagall and Vector had been a figment of his imagination.

"I think that's enough excitement for one night," Harry announced, picking up a sheet of parchment from his desk and glancing over it, "I didn't have much else planned anyway. I don't think any of you would object to an earlier night. Class dismissed, see you tomorrow."

It did not take long for the large auditorium to clear out, aside from the select few that were staying for the special meeting Dumbledore had arranged. Just about all of the students left in a matter of minutes, except for Ron, Hermione and Ginny, all of which had joined Harry on the stage and were standing quietly about his desk.

Finally all that remained were Lupin, Snuffles, Hagrid, McGonagall, Snape and of course

Dumbledore. After a quick check to make sure no unwanted eavesdroppers were present Snape and Hagrid pulled the doors leading in or out of the auditorium closed.

"You never told me his classes were like *that*, Moony!" were the first words out of Sirius' mouth once he changed out of his animagus form.

"They usually aren't," admitted Lupin, stroking his chin thoughtfully.

Sirius sank back into his seat and shook his head, "I need to sit down."

"You already are sitting down."

"Oh. That's good."

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"I'm afraid I've been a trifle... disingenuous... with regards certain events that transpired over the summer."

Sirius leaned close to Lupin and whispered, "Disingenuous?"

His old friend answered, eyes not leaving the stage, "Polite word for lying."

It was several minutes into the meeting and by now Sirius had managed to recover and slow the rapid

beatings of his heart. The duel between his godson and Ginny Weasley had come within a short inch of giving Sirius a stroke.

Dumbledore had spoken for a while, discussing with them the attack on Hogsmeade, the Dementors abandonment of Azkaban, the disappearance of many of the prisons inmates at the same time, the possible movements and activities of known Death Eaters and lastly Voldemort's next possible move against them.

Against Harry.

After all this had been concluded, Dumbledore had turned the floor over to Harry, who was also one of the reasons this little group had been assembled. When he had heard about the attack on Hogsmeade, so close to Harry, Sirius had been frantic in his attempts to return to Hogwarts as fast as he could. When he had heard that Harry had apparently done the impossible and apparated from Hogwarts to Hogsmeade during the attack, Sirius had felt his heart stop.

*'I don't know what's worse,' he thought, 'Knowing Harry had rushed into a situation like that or seeing him and Ginny fight like that.'*

Now Harry was pacing restlessly back and forth across the stage, hands clasped behind his back, chin down and a look on his face that clearly said he was trying to figure something out. To Sirius' right, standing with his arms crossed and a dark scowl was Snape, who had made valuable complaints about Harry and then later his friends being included in this meeting.

"Why am I not surprised?" muttered the Potions Master.

Harry looked up from his pacing and glowered at Snape, somehow having heard what the man had said. His eyes also turned towards him, Sirius was delighted to see Snape's sallow face become just a shade paler under Harry's glare.

"I don't suppose any of you have heard of the Order of the Phoenix?" Harry asked after a moment, glancing over at Ginny.

"I can't say that I have," said McGonagall, looking sternly at her pupil.

Harry groaned and rubbed the bridge of his nose as Hermione started bouncing up and down, an enlightened expression on her face. "They're the people who wrote the book you gave me for Christmas!" exclaimed Hermione.

"Be very careful with it please," beseeched Harry, "Merlin would kill me if anything happened to the damned thing."

"Merlin?" asked Remus.

Harry had resumed pacing, "Yes, Merlin. He was one of the people who have held the Order. It's hard to explain I'm afraid. You see... the Order..."

His voice trailed off and he seemed to flounder about for words. Ginny, who had been watching from where she was sitting on his desk, asked after a while, "You said you were a member of the Order. Perhaps you should start there."

"Actually," announced Dumbledore, "I think it would be best, Harry, if you started at the beginning of all this."

"Okay. Okay..." Harry took a few deep breaths and seemed to settle down, "It happened on my birthday, when I suddenly found a phoenix in my room. It was delivering a message."

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A thousand thoughts and worries were flying through Sirius' mind as Harry paused to conjure up a chair to sit in. After a moment he casually conjured up accompanying chairs for Ron and Hermione, leaving Ginny to use the chair from his desk.

"The phoenix, you see, wasn't a real phoenix. It was the Order," Harry continued after his friends were seated, "The moment I opened the message it... well... possessed me, I guess. Merged with me would probably be a better word for it. However you care to describe it, the Order is now inside of me, a part of me."

"Are you saying the Order is alive?" asked Hermione, sounding alarmed by the prospect. Of course, Sirius was also alarmed by the idea of something "possessing" his godson.

Harry shook his head and chewed on his bottom lip, "No. The Order's not alive, it simple is... it has some sort of awareness, an instinct I think, that's how it chooses its avatars, but it's not a living thing."

"And it chose you," deduced Ginny thoughtfully.

"Yes, although I'm not entirely clear on all the points it considered for my selection," agreed Harry, looking slightly embarrassed, "Apparently, from what the others tell me, I was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"You mean it was an accident?" blurted Snape snidely.

*'And here I was telling Harry that accidents happen.'*

Harry rolled his eyes and chuckled, "No. That's the reason it chose me. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. And yet I survived. It's something I've made a habit of, which is why I chose me to be its latest custodian. I'm a focal point, my actions tend to have results that are further reaching than most other people."

"So was exactly is this Order of yours?" asked Snape clearly intrigued, but anxious to get on with it.

"Power," Harry answered immediately, "A lot of power."

There was silence for a long while as everyone considered his words. It was Ron that finally asked the question they were all thinking, "How much power?"

Harry smiled thinly, "A lot."

"Define 'a lot'," insisted Sirius, starting to worry even more.

"If something went wrong... I could conceivably crack the planet in half."

Silence blanketed them as the implications of Harry's words became clear to them. Sirius could feel Lupin tensing beside him and everyone heard Ron's struggled swallow.

"That's... a lot of power," Hermione concluded, looking at Harry with such wide eyes Sirius wondered, ludicrously, if perhaps she was part owl.

*'Oh, get a grip on yourself Black! Stay focused on the matter at hand.'*

"Which is how you were able to apparate to Hogsmeade," agreed Dumbledore, stroking his moustache and looking at Harry with a penetrating stare, "And, if I'm not mistaken, how you apparated from Little Whinging straight into my office on the morning of your birthday."

Harry sheepishly nodded his head, "Yes, that's correct. I thought it would be better so say I'd apparated to the village and walked up to the castle, rather than let on that I can pass through the anti-apparation wards without too much trouble."

Lupin leaned forward curiously, "Too much trouble? You mean you can't do it with impunity?"

"It takes a good bit of power," admitted Harry with shrug, "I probably couldn't do it more than a couple of dozen times a day. It would be easier to simply tear the wards apart first, but that would leave the rest of you open to attack."

"You - you could bring down the wards?" breathed Snape, clutching a hand to his chest.

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"Like tissue paper, only with less effort," confirmed Harry.

Ron swallowed again and asked, "So you can do anything you like."

Harry looked apologetically at his friend and shrugged, "As long as I don't try and use more energy than the Order can supply. I can do a lot, but not everything." He rubbed the back of his neck in a rueful manner, "I can't play the piano, or dance worth a damn and my attempts at the Animagus transformation have been... less than a complete success."

"Yeh - yer an Animagus?" breathed Hagrid behind Sirius, sounding unsure whether to be delighted or horrified.

"So everyone keeps tell me," grouched Harry, folding his arms across his chest, "Every time I try to change however I end up flat on my back and barely conscious. I've only tried it twice since this whole mess started. We figure it probably has something to do with the size of my Animagus form that's causing the problem."

"Size?" asked Remus

"General consensus is that I'm going to change into either a very large dragon or a very large dust mite," replied Harry jokingly.

Snape, still standing solemnly by himself, brought up an interesting point, "Fine, so you have power. But who taught you all this, Potter? Animagus, duelling, apparating, sword fighting... who is this 'we' you keep talking about?"

Harry suddenly looked exceptionally nervous, shifting awkwardly in his chair. "The other members of the Order have been teaching me," he finally said in a soft voice.

"I thought you said the Order was inside you," said Hermione, "D'you mean to say it's also in other people as well?"

"Nope, just me," answered Harry, gnawing on his lip, "The other 'members' are those people who held the Order before me. Merlin's the most well know of them."

"So in other words," summed up Snape, sounding as if he had serious doubts about Harry's sanity. For that matter, after hearing what he had, Sirius wasn't that sure about his godson's mental health either.

"You talk to dead people."

"No, I don't," corrected Harry immediately.

Ron shook his head, trying to clear it, "I'm really confused now, Harry."

Harry grinned, "Don't worry. I'll have you completely bewildered all too soon."

"I'm getting a headache," moaned Snape quietly, glowering even more fiercely at Harry.

"Every person that is chosen by the Order leaves a - an echo," explained Harry. "When they die their memories and experience, their personality, is left with the Order. It - it's like leaving a footprint in the earth, only this is an imprint of their minds."

"Like the shades that leave a wand during Priori Incantatem," murmured Dumbledore, his eyes sparkling with interest and excitement.

All Harry had time to do way nod before Hermione was snapped out a question, "So that book you gave me... it was really written by *Merlin*?"

Harry smiled and nodded again, "Yeah. I had to apparate from Surrey to Dartmoor every day for a week during the summer before I found it. After all, a book with every spell in existence would be too much of an asset to leave lying around."

"That's impossible," asserted Ron, shaking his head vigorously, "That book's big, but it's not *that* big! It couldn't possible have *every* spell in existence."

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"You didn't look at it very closely, Ron, did you?" asked Hermione, looking smugly at the boy sitting beside her. When Ron paused and looked cautiously at her she elaborated, "The book is an index. It contains the name of the spell and a short description. It's pretty much just a very elaborate table of contents."

Harry finished the exploration, grinning wickedly as Ron's jaw dropped, "Once you've found the spell you want, all you do it tap its name twice with your wand and the book will give you more detailed information. Where, Why, When, How and whatever else."

Snape sank into a sit, not far from Sirius, and quietly complained, "Wonderful. Potter with almost

unlimited power and unlimited knowledge. Just what I've always wanted."

"I believe Shakespeare said it best," declared Dumbledore, "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them. Harry, I fear, you will have to live with all three."

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## 16. Veil of Tears

"Harry Potter! Harry Potter! Harry Potter!"

Ron leaned over to Ginny, sitting beside him, and whispered in her ear, "I know I shouldn't say anything, but right now, this was *not* one of Harry's better ideas."

At the moment Ginny secretly agreed with her brother, but casting a look to where Dobby was cheering so excitedly she couldn't bring herself to say anything.

"Harry Potter! Harry Potter! Harry Potter!"

Dobby was decked out head to toe in clothing that was either red, yellow or both. The tea cosy on his head was red with thin yellow stripes; his shorts were a pale yellow and his socks were red with tiny golden snitches flying around and yellow with tiny red dragons flying around. Best of all was his shirt, which Dobby was clearly wearing with pride.

It was a bright scarlet, with an animated golden lion roaring silently on the front and the words "GO GRYFFINDOR!" flashing white and yellow on the back. This had been arranged by Harry and presented to Dobby for Christmas by the entire Quidditch team as an assurance that they did not blame the house-elf for when Malfoy had hexed their breakfast before the match against Slytherin.

"Harry Potter! Harry Potter! Harry Potter!"

Everyone had agreed that, considering Dobby's peculiarities and obsession with clothes, this was the perfect gift for the dedicated house-elf.

Everyone had definitely not expected Dobby to actually attend the next Gryffindor Quidditch match, against Hufflepuff, and threaten to rupture their eardrums with his high-pitched screams of support for Harry. Non-stop. Ginny was beginning to wonder how the tiny creature managed to keep going without ever seeming to pause for breath.

Nor had anyone been expecting the other sixteen house-elves that had put in an appearance. Unlike Dobby they were dressed in the usual pillow cases and rags, albeit specially dyed bright red in support of Gryffindor. Apparently the kind gesture the team had bestowed on Dobby had not gone unnoticed and had endeared them to many of the house-elves.

"Harry Potter! Harry Potter! Harry Potter!"

*'If nothing else, they're enthusiastic,'* mused Ginny.

"Harry Potter! Harry Potter! Harry Potter!"

"Harry, mon, had better catch that damn Snitch soon, mon," whispered Gareth, sitting on Ginny's other side, "Otherwise I'll be deaf for the rest of m'life, mon."

"I'm sure he's working on it, Gareth," she assured him, wincing at a particularly loud squeak from Dobby and several of his compatriot house-elves.

"Oh - that was a close one!" announced Lee Jordan, "Spinnet is almost hit by a Bludger sent her way by Beater Stein. Blocked by one of the Weasley twins - Ah - Hufflepuff are in possession - it's Jordan - she passes to Brickman - No! - intercepted by Bell!"

The score was seventy to thirty, in Gryffindor's favour. Apparent the team were intent on proving that they *were* better than the reserves, who had slaughtered Slytherin in the match they had played before Christmas. And they certainly were, Ginny thought as she watched, but it was a close thing. Mainly the difference was that the older players were more polished in their moves and confident in their ability to work together.

*'Well, they've been a team for years now. It's to be expected.'*

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Ginny watched as her brothers, who both funnily enough were identical right down to their auras as well, swept down the pitch on either side of the attacking Chasers. The girls were swooping towards the Hufflepuff goals in what Ginny recognised as a Peregrine Ploy, Angelina in the lead with the Quaffle tucked under her arm.

Well above the action and at the other end of the field, Harry was flying above the Gryffindor goals in a lazy figure-eight. Following doggedly behind him was the new Hufflepuff Seeker, Owen Cauldwell, who was in his second-year now. Despite the fact that Harry was tracing and retracing his flight path every fifteen seconds, Owen was sticking close to his heels.

"Harry Potter! Harry Potter! Harry Potter!"

"Alicia shoots - it's a goal! Another ten points to Gryffindor!" cheered Lee, "Eighty points to thirty.

Brickman has the Quaffle - ducks under a Bludger and passes to Tilley..."

Suddenly Harry shot vertically down towards the ground, his scarlet robes whipping behind him as he dropped like an anvil. Owen tried to follow, but his inexperience in the game cost him a few seconds before he was able to.

"Potter's diving!" shouted Lee, "He's seen the Snitch!"

"Harry Potter!! Harry Potter!! Harry Potter!!"

A foot above the ground Harry pulled out of his dive and skimmed across the pitch. Owen followed after him, but with less extreme manoeuvring and with several seconds of lag time. Meanwhile Harry was streaking across the pitch, flying close to the ground, his feet almost brushing the grass, leaning low over the broom's handle.

Near the centre of the Quidditch pitch he jerked his body upright and his right arm flicked out in a

blur, grabbing the Snitch just before Harry flew into it. He twisted to one side and dug his feet into the pitch, leaving a trail of scuffed earth, and skidded to an abrupt halt. He arm was held up high in victory and the Gryffindor stands erupted into cheers and celebrations.

"Potter has caught the Snitch!" screamed Lee ecstatically, "Gryffindor wins the game, two hundred and thirty points to forty - Hufflepuff scoring in the last seconds."

"Harry Potter!! Harry Potter!! Harry Potter!!"

Dobby was having paroxysms of delight and was popping from place to place around the stands with every incantation. All the other house-elves were screaming and cheering just as loudly and enthusiastically as the rest of the Gryffindor supports, waving their thin arms in the air and jumping excitedly up and down.

"Come on," groaned Ron, taking Ginny by the arm and pulling her to her feet, "Let's head down to the pitch and congratulate the conquering heroes before Dobby gets there."

"Ron!" chided Hermione, smacking him lightly on the arm.

Minor flirtations aside they were down on the pitch not much later, making their way to where Harry and his team mates were congratulating each other. The rest of Gryffindor house swarmed over them, shaking hands, patting backs, exchanging hugs and kisses and all other manner of congratulations.

As Ginny approached she saw Harry shaking hands with Cho Chang, who had been sitting with Neville during the match. Since Hufflepuff had been Cedric's house nobody had expected her to give any support to Gryffindor, but she had sat by Neville's side during the game, albeit quietly and with little fanfare beyond applauding when either team scored.

*'I'd really like to know how those two got together,'* she mused as she reached Harry and was swept up in a hug, much the same as after the previous game. After holding her tightly for a few heartbeats Harry pulled back slightly, but keeping his arms around her.

"I think a celebration is in order, don't you?" he asked, leaning towards her. Ginny felt her heart quicken as they drew nearer. Their lips were not even a breath apart and already she felt a fire burning within her.

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Just before his lips could press against her Harry suddenly jerked back and away. For a moment Ginny had the horrible thought that another attack was taking place, but the startled look on Harry's face said otherwise. A moment later, before either of them could speak, Harry was hoisted in the air and set down upon the shoulders of Fred and George.

"Let's go, Harry!" shouted George, beaming widely.

"Victory party in the Gryffindor Tower!" agreed Fred, as the two Beaters turned and began jogging off the pitch. Ginny gaped after them as they hurried away with Harry bouncing unsteadily on their shoulders. Clenching her hands she hissed in annoyance and called threateningly after them.

"I'm going to plant the two of you headfirst in the ground like turnips!"

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The party in the Gryffindor common room had lasted a couple of hours before tapering out as the students left for their trip to Hogsmeade. Despite the fact that the village had been attacked less than a month ago, Dumbledore had announced that repairs were well underway and a show of support for the village inhabitants from the school could only do good.

This was, however, the first visit any of them would be making to the village since the attack and Hermione did not know what to expect. Harry had been exceptionally recalcitrant about sharing with his friends the details of what he had seen and the *Daily Prophet* had not gone into much detail aside from giving a total figure of those killed.

Two hundred and seventy four.

It was just after two when Hermione, along with Ron, Ginny and Harry, reached the village and began meandering their way through the streets. If anything it was worse than she had imagined. The black and white photographs presented by the *Daily Prophet* were pale shadows compared to the reality.

"Great Merlin," breathed Ron, looking about. "Dad wrote me... he was part of a Ministry team sent to help... said it was bad. I never knew he was so good at understating the fact."

"It looks like pictures I've seen of places that were bombed during the war," agreed Hermione as they trod down the main cobblestone streets leading the village square.

The section they were passing seemed to have borne the brunt of one of the many fires that had swept through Hogsmeade that night. The building to their left, which Hermione recalled had been a large boarding house, had been reduced to a charred ruin. Even after nearly a month the harsh smell of fire and smoke lingered in the air and soot drifted about on the gentle breeze.

As they walked by Harry inexplicably slowed to a halt, his face suddenly overcome with a stricken expression. Hermione felt Ginny grab her tightly by the arm, her grip painful, but she could only watch as Harry sank down to the ground. As he knelt there he held his hands before him, as if he were holding something infinitely precious.

"Harry?" she asked timidly, "Harry, what's wrong?"

"It was here. A girl," he said after a while, looking helplessly down at his upturned hands, "Couldn't have been more than five, maybe six years old. Fine, gold hair, almost to her waist. The most beautiful blue eyes, like sapphires on fire. So clear."

*'Oh god, no,'* she thought, *'Oh, Harry...'*

"She looked like an angel," he whispered hoarsely, "Sounded like one too."

.oOo.

*Flames were licking high into the night sky as the boarding house burned. The ground floor was*

*completely engulfed in fire and Harry knew that anybody trapped within was already dead. The floors above had also caught alight, if not yet at the same intensity as below.*

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*Peering over the low stone and iron fence he made out several bodies strewn just outside the front door. He could see the terrible black and green aura of the Killing Curse flitted around and about where they lay, telling him that there was nothing he could do; they were gone.*

*A soft whimper drew his attention away from the blaze and towards the street. The fire lit up everything in bright yellow and orange, allowing nothing to hide in shadow. He could see a small form curled up on the cobblestones, not far from where he had apparated into the village.*

*It was a young girl, barely a third his age.*

*He knelt down by her and picked her up, something hot sticky covering his hands as he held her in his arms. Her hair was glowing a burnished gold in the firelight and she looked up at him. Even under the warm colours of the blazing fire he could tell that she was incredibly pale and knew that what he felt on his hands was her blood.*

*Miss? Can you hear me?*

*Her eyes struggled to open and she gripped his hand tightly, making him feel the chill that was enveloping her body.*

*Mister? I feel cold. So col'.*

*Her injuries were very bad and from what he could tell there was too much internal damage for even his magic to heal. Even if he could she would still die from the blood loss.*

*It's alright. I'm here. I'll make you warm.*

*He cast a quick warming charm, something he had learned years ago, and tried to help move her into a more comfortable position.*

*I'm tired. I wan' go sleep.*

*Her head had sunk down and was resting him his lap as she looked up at him, her bright blue eyes growing heavy and slowly falling shut.*

*Sleep then. That's a good girl. Just go to sleep.*

*She nodded a fraction and tenderly reached up to stroke his cheek. He took her hand and held it gently, feeling her strength ebb away.*

*You'll feel better when you wake up.*

*.oOo.*

*"I couldn't save her."*

The words seemed to be torn roughly from Harry's throat and he seemed on the verge of bursting into a flood of tears. His eyes were glistening with moisture, but Hermione knew that no tears would escape them. She had never seen Harry cry and she doubted that she ever would.

"You alright there, Potter?" called Blaise Zabini from across the street, standing with Padma Patil and Terry Boot, all three looking concerned about Harry's condition.

"He's fine!" replied Ginny, but not sounding very confident.

*'I'm not sure he is, Ginny,' thought Hermione bleakly as she helped Harry to his feet, 'And I don't know if there's anything we can do to help him, either.'*

"Come on, the Three Broomsticks is just around the corner," said Ron, pulling on her arm, "I think I could do with a butterbeer before we start shopping or anything else. "

For once none of them disagreed with him.

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The Three Broomsticks was looking much the worse for wear, Ron noted as the four of them reached the inn and walked inside. He supposed he should not have been surprised, on Christmas day the tavern was bound to be fully with patrons and thus a prime target for the Death Eaters. Large scorch marks marred the walls, though fresh paint covered one wall and was being applied to another. The wooden beams supporting the ceiling were cracked and badly burned in places, and some had even been replaced entirely. The acrid smell of smoke still seemed to hang in the air. There were fewer tables filling the room than Ron remembered and the shelves behind the bar were stocked with less bottles than before.

*'I wonder how many people died in here during the attack?' Ron thought, unable to prevent it as they found an empty table near the back.*

"What can I get for you kids?" asked Madam Rosmerta, who was waiting at the table before they had even reached it. She looked a good deal thinner than when Ron had last seen her and held a thick wooden walking stick in one hand.

"Four butterbeers please, Madam Rosmerta," said Hermione as she sank into the seat Ron had pulled out for her.

Rosmerta nodded and left them to finish seating themselves. As she walked to the bar Ron could see that she was limping along rather than sashaying as she usually did. She leaned heavily on the walking stick and moving her right leg seemed painful for her. Swallowing at this uncomfortable reminder of the attack, Ron turned back to his friends. Ginny and Hermione, he saw, had also been watching Rosmerta's hobbled walk.

"That reminds me," said Harry suddenly, looking in the opposite direction to where Rosmerta was walking. Ron turned in his seat and saw a middle-aged warlock sitting a few tables away reading the newspaper. Harry looked across their table at Hermione and asked, "What ever did you do to that parasite Rita Skeeter?"

Ron was surprised at the mention of this. He too had forgotten that Hermione had caught Rita in her

Animagus form; that of a beetle. He looked at Hermione, sitting calmly next to him, and saw the satisfied smirk that settled across her face. Now that Harry had brought it up, Ron was also curious as to just what his friend had to the notorious reporter.

"Let's just say," Hermione told them, "that the entomology exhibit at the Coventry Zoo has a special, one-of-a-kind, beetle Animagus as part of the live display."

"What?!" exclaimed Ginny. "You gave her to a zoo?"

Ron sat back in his chair and laughed merrily, delighted by the idea especially after all the trouble Skeeter had stirred up the previous year. Harry, who had been very quiet since they left the ruined boarding house, cracked a smile and chuckled appreciatively.

"It's only for the year," said Hermione, shaking with giggles, "I'll let her out as soon as I get back home after school is finished."

"You're evil," giggled Ginny.

They were interrupted by the return of Madam Rosmerta, using her wand to levitate a large tray of drinks behind her, the other hand clutching her walking stick. On the tray were four large flagons of butterbeer as well as five empty shot glasses and a bottle filled with a rich amber liquid was almost seemed to glow.

"Here you go, boys and girls," announced Rosmerta, setting the flagons of butterbeer down on the table, immediately followed by the shot glasses and bottle.

Ron was puzzled by this, he had assumed those were for another table, and was wondering why the tavern matron had brought them. Rosmerta held the bottle up, presenting it for their inspection.

"The last, and only, bottle of Fire-Whiskey that's left from my old stock," she told them, pulling the cork out and moving to pour the drink into the shot glasses.

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"Aren't we a little underage for this?" asked Harry.

"Mr Potter, you're the only person I'd drink it with," explained Rosmerta, "And I don't feel like waiting."

.oOo.

*He was amazed anyone had survived this. The inn had obviously been attacked by a large number of Death Eaters. Bodies were everywhere, inside and out, some killed by the Avada Kedavra, others by more conventional means.*

*Harry had helped maybe half a dozen people out of the damaged building. He would have preferred to keep them still and in one place, but he could not risk keeping them inside with the fires. All the alcohol, from shattered liquor bottles, kept catching alight, regardless of how many charms he used to try and extinguish the blaze.*

*He was just managed to get a badly burned old warlock to the gaping hole where the front door had been when a loud crash sounded from the back of the building. He guessed that part of the roof there had collapsed. He was about to leave, having pulled out everyone still alive, and move on to the next building, when he heard it.*

*A cry of pain.*

*It was coming from the back of the inn, where the crash had come from. He forced his way through the wreckage of the room, casting yet another dampening charm as he went. The door leading into the back was jammed, forcing Harry to tear it off its hinges to get through.*

*He was right, the ceiling had collapsed and she was trapped under the debris. As he hurried over to her he wondered why she had still been in the building. Pulling away the looser debris he saw that she was pinned down by a large wooden beam, one of the cross beams from the roof.*

*It had fallen across her legs, crushing them under its weight. She was conscious though and in obvious pain as he hunkered down next to her.*

*I'm stuck. Get out, you can't do anything.*

*Another fire had started, just across from them, and Harry could see that it was rapidly making its way towards them. He smothered the flames, but could not extinguish them completely and in a few minutes they would be crackling away again.*

*How bad is it? Can you move your legs?*

*He tugged experimentally at the beam, trying to assess how it had fallen. He had doubts that he could lift it off her without causing her more injury.*

*I can't feel them. I can't feel anything below my waist.*

*A hint of panic in her voice. But still relatively calm. She was probably in shock, he thought and quickly waved his wand over her body, healing her minor injuries and putting a pain relief charm on the others.*

*Dammit Mr Potter, get out of here! Don't waste your life trying to save me!*

*Harry glared at her and shook his head. He moved behind her and slid his arms under hers as he prepared to remove the beam.*

*I'm not trying to save you.*

*The beam was large, thicker than he was around the middle, and probably weighed close to a tonne.*

*Harry lifted it with enough magic to force it back up to and then through the ceiling into the floor above.*

*I'm going to save you.*

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*As the beam shot into the air Harry pulled and dragged her out from beneath it. Once she was clear of the debris he easily picked her up and swung her over his shoulder. As he blew out the back wall with a gesture, clearing a path for them out of the burning storeroom, he noticed she was clasping a bottle of Fire-Whiskey in her hand.*

*Glancing back as he carried her out, he thought that it was perhaps the only bottle to survive the attack in one piece.*

.oOo.

As Madam Rosmerta poured the whiskey into the shot glasses Ron glanced down at Harry's hands. While his friend's face might have been perfectly impassive, his hands were clenched so tightly his knuckles seemed to be without skin they were so white.

"Please, Roz," Harry finally said, "Enough with the 'mister'. It's just Harry."

"Alright, Harry," agreed Rosmerta happily, setting the glasses before each of them. She lifted hers in the air and proposed, "A toast."

Harry nodded solemnly and raised his own drink, "A toast."

Rosmerta knocked her shot back and said, "To life," before lowering the empty glass.

"To surviving," replied Harry, downing his drink and following the gesture.

Ginny had been watching Harry closely and said, "To healing." She threw back her drink in a smooth motion, trying not to splutter or cough she set her glass down, face burning as red as her hair.

Hermione eyed her drink cautiously and then toasted, "To friends," finishing the deep amber drink with a gulp. Her eyes clearly began to water as the fire-whiskey scorched its way down her throat.

Ron was the only one left and, after a moment of thought, he raised his glass high and in a solemn tone made his toast. It sounded almost like a prayer for the future and maybe it was.

"To peace."

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The rest of their lunch in the Three Broomsticks had been rather subdued after Rosmerta left to continue working. Between the four of them they had finished the Fire-Whiskey and their order of butterbeer. After that they had bid Rosmerta a fond, and somewhat slurred, farewell and then proceeded back out into Hogsmeade.

"Where have those two gotten two?" asked Ginny as she and Harry exited the clothing store she had wanted to look inside of.

After leaving the Three Broomsticks the four students had wandered around for about an hour or so, stopping by one shop or another. Somewhere along the line Harry and Ginny had gone into one shop while Ron and Hermione continued on without them.

Harry gazed around for a moment, before pointing, "Over there."

*\*Wow. That's the longest sentence you've said since lunch.\**

Ginny took hold of his arm and started leading him across the street to where Ron and Hermione were standing in conversation. He looked over at her as she pulled him along, wondering how she could possibly be the same girl that used to blush, squeak and run away whenever he used to look her way.

"What the heck are they doing?" Harry suddenly asked, looking away from Ginny and across the street at where his two best friends appeared to be... they couldn't be... they were.

Ginny followed his gaze and her eyes grew wide, "They're kissing!"

He glanced at Ginny and then back to Ron and Hermione, who certainly seemed wrapped up in each others arms. Somehow, even though he had seen it coming, actually seeing his friends snogging like that was something Harry would rather have avoided.

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*'Ra's light, they're using tongue!'*

"Ra's light," breathed Ginny, watching closely, "they're using tongue!"

Harry was so distracted by the sight of his two best friends that it took him a moment before he realized what Ginny had just said. He looked at her querulously, "Where'd you learn that?"

"What?" she asked, tearing her eyes away from the couple.

"Ra's light," he said, repeating the ancient phrase that praised the Egyptian equivalent of Merlin. It was only used by some of the older wizards and sects that bordered the Nile, so he doubted that Ginny had just heard it from someone. Besides, she had repeated his thoughts word for word.

Ginny shrugged, "I don't know. Just came to me."

*'Would you lot have anything to do with this?'*

*'I don't think so. Ever since the attack on Hogsmeade you've been tapping heavily into the Order's power while preparing...'*

*\*The energy backwash from that is drowning out our connection to her.\**

*'Then how come she said what I was thinking?'*

*\*Beats us. Just because we're all powerful and all knowing doesn't mean we know everything.\**

*\*Could be a trace impression echo...\**

*\*Uh, Harry... she's looking at you funny.\**

Harry blinked and looked at Ginny to see that she was looking at him with a strange sparkle in her brown eyes. There was a hungry look to her that made his stomach roll and twist about as it did before a Quidditch match.

"Want to join them?" she asked coyly.

"I don't think so," he replied, glancing at the two. Didn't they need to breathe? "I'm sure they would not appreciate the intrusion."

Ginny grinned up at him and wound her hands around his waist. She was standing very close to him now and he could feel her breast brushing lightly against his chest.

"That isn't what I meant."

*'Oh God, she's propositioning me.'*

*\*So? What are you waiting for? Kiss her!\**

Harry grinned back at her, wrapping his own arms around her. "Why, Miss Weasley... are you

suggesting that the two of us engage in an act of wanton lust? Whatever would you mother say?" She smiled wickedly, "Mum and dad have had seven kids. I'm sure we're not thinking of doing anything they hasn't done themselves."

He was tilting his head down towards hers as she spoke, his left hand trailing lazily up her spine to the nape of her neck. She shivered under his caress and leaned up to him, full lips parted just a fraction.

"Oi, Harry mate, good to see you out and about!"

"And with our ickle Gin Gin as well!"

"Warms the very cockles of my heart!"

"Oh, dear brother, it brings a tear to me eye!"

It was Fred and George, yet again this day, that had interrupted them. Both of them were grinning broadly and with a conspiratorial edge to their smiles.

"Join us for a butterbeer?"

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The full moon would be rising the next night, which was the reason Remus Lupin found himself coming to the Hospital Wing. Dumbledore had arranged for Snape to brew sufficient amounts of Wolfsbane potion at the beginning of the year, enough to keep Lupin supplied whenever it was that time.

Once everything was brewed and bottled, the Wolfsbane had been left in the care of the Hogwarts Matron; Madam Pomfrey. And so Lupin was coming to collect a draught for the following night. Upon entering the infirmary, however, the Defence teacher came to an abrupt halt at the sight that greeted him.

"Morgana's Bane!" he exclaimed, "What happened to you two?"

Fred and George Weasley were sitting on one of the beds, both with black eyes, bloody noses that were probably broken from the look of them and colourfully bruised jaws. The twins turned with a moan and looked blearily at Lupin.

"We made the mistake-" said Fred, ruefully rubbing his bruised jaw.

"Of interrupting Harry and our dear sister-" continued George, with a split lip.

"During a tender moment," finished Fred.

Lupin was both horrified and amused, "You're not telling me *Harry* did this to you?"

Both twins shook their heads then groaned at the motion.

"Well, if it wasn't Harry," asked Lupin, "then who...?"

The twins exchanged a pained look and then turned to their Defence professor and told him in an outraged chorus, "Ginny!"

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## 17. Lead Me Into Temptation

Fire.

Lots of fire.

It was all around him, to the left, to the right, in front, behind, everywhere. The houses were burning, as were the shops and stores, the trees lining the pavement, everything. The entire village had been transformed into a blazing inferno.

Black shadows danced amongst the flames, some tall, some short, all threatening. Twisted shapes contorted around the burning pyres, screams of terror and malicious laughter accompanying their taunting dance.

Death Eaters.

Lots of Death Eaters.

The clouds were hanging low in the sky. No. Not clouds. No, it was smoke. Smoke from the fires raging throughout the hamlet. He could see it rising up in thick billowing columns, framed in a dark red and orange glow.

Impossible blinding blue-white lightning joined the layer of smoke to the ground, thunder rumbling like a hidden avalanche. The fires were crackling so loudly it was almost all he could hear, except for the pained screams and wicked laughter.

The post office, already engulfed in flames, loomed up before him. The owls inside were trapped and screeching in agony and terror. He had never heard anything like it. They sounded almost human as they cried out while the fire claimed them one by one.

He tried to run, either to help or flee he did not know, but found himself unable to move. His feet were leaden and his legs refused to work. He could only watch in horror as a terrible visage rose up behind the burning post office. It was a giant figure, thrice the height of the building and shrouded in blackness, despite the ever-present flames.

Goodbye, Harry.

Death Eaters surrounded him on all sides and were slowly closing in on him with small, measured steps. The firelight illuminated their blank, skull-like masks beneath the cowls of their black robes as they drew nearer and nearer. Voldemort was looming high over the horizon, his crimson eyes glowing maliciously in the night time gloom.

Your friends will be next.

.oOo.

Harry woke with a jolt, his heart pounding with in his chest like a trip hammer. He sucked in a deep and shaky breath, trying to slow his pulse to something more normal. Sweat was soaking his shirt and he could the garment clinging to his chest and back. The heat of the fire, crackling merrily at his feet,

surrounded him like a heavy blanket.

**\*Welcome back. Rough trip?\***

'No more than usual, Iolaus.'

He could hear the soft murmur of conversation surrounding him, filling the common room. Taking another deep breath and licking his lips, Harry pulled himself upright and opened his eyes.

\*\*\*

Ginny gently caressed Harry's head through the thick mop of his unruly black hair, trying to ease the tension radiating from him.

'That was a shorter one than usual.'

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He was lying on the floor of the common room, feet pointing towards the crackling fireplace, his head and shoulders propped up against the couch Ginny was lying on. It was the position he always lay in during the short catnaps he would take after finishing his homework and before going to bed for the night.

Ron had tried it himself once. Just once. He had quickly learnt that his shoes did not withstand the fire's heat nearly as well as Harry's dragon hide boots. The point had been forcibly driven home when the soles of his shoes had somehow caught alight, resulting in a highly amusing hot footed dance around the common room.

It had been young Dennis Creevey that had finally acted on Ron's bellows, conjuring up a large bucket of water to douse the flames. This did not sit well with Ron, who ended up drenched from head to toe, since Dennis was a wizard and a simple extinguishing spell would have done a much better, not to mention drier, job of it.

To make matters worse was the fact that Dennis was a carbon copy of his brother Colin and was easily excitable. Thus nobody, besides Dennis, was very surprised when he lost his grip on the pail, letting the container fly through the air behind the water and smash into Ron's face.

A perfect example of adding injury to insult declared the twins.

Harry had been very quiet ever since their return from Hogsmeade the previous month, spending a lot of his time either practising duelling, sword fighting or some form of martial arts in the Practical Fighting Techniques auditorium. Or, as he was now, flying prone on the floor, close to the fire and eventually dozing off.

After several people had reported his reactions to the devastation in Hogsmeade, and after having seen the damage up close, the Gryffindors had cornered Harry one night and demanded to know just what had happened on the night of the attack.

And so Harry had sat down, albeit reluctantly, and given a clear and concise account of the work he had done during the aftermath. Trying to extinguish the fires as they relentlessly spread from building to building, helping pull victims from the wreckage, everything.

By his own count twenty eight people had died in his presence and very few of them had passed on in a peaceful manner.

Since then the Gryffindors had become extremely protective of Harry. Not in public, although they did support anything he proposed without reservation, but within their own ranks. On the long nights when Harry lay by the fire, head propped against the couch, there were always at least a half a dozen Gryffindors present to maintain a vigil of him as he slumbered.

No matter how long he slept by the fireplace they would remain at his side, taking shifts if need be.

Only Ginny, Ron and Hermione were always there. Ginny would lay down and stretch out across the couch Harry would lean against, while his two best friends would be close at hand in the sitting chairs set next to the fireplace.

The nightmares were never far from Harry when he slept. A pattern had quickly emerged and by now everyone living in the tower knew it well.

When it began, Harry would tense up, his muscles coiling and bunching tightly. His entire body would shiver and tremble from the effort which often brought a sweat to his brow. His jaw would clench tight and his teeth could be heard grinding from the other side of the common room.

Next came the twitches in either Harry's arms or legs, sometimes both. As if he were fighting against something... or trying to flee from it. Soft whimpers and moans would escape him during this part, his face contorting into an expression of such utter helplessness that some of the more emotional girls began to cry in sympathy.

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As the nightmare progressed Harry's movements would become more and more violent, sometimes he would even lash out. Some of his watchers had learned the hard way, usually by means of a bloody nose or black eye, to stay well back when Harry began to struggle. His breathing became ragged and harsh, growing faster and faster until they feared he might hyper-ventilate.

Occasionally words would escape his lips, pleas or denials, signifying the beginning of the nightmare's final act. Harry would arch his back, almost to the point where they worried he might injure his spine, before crashing back into the waking world. It was like watching a elastic band being stretched taut and finally snapping from the strain.

Sometimes, if the nightmare was particularly bad, Harry's magic would begin to leak out, causing the furniture to shake, parchment flew wildly about, the walls and floor creaked ominously and the windows rattled and sometimes even cracked.

Tonight's had not been that bad, fortunately.

Crookshanks twisted about in Hermione's lap and purred as Harry pulled himself up into a sitting

position, kneading his neck with both hands. Everyone, save for Ginny, had moved a little back once he had awoken, knowing he disliked being crowded or attended to. Nobody said a word to him, or each other, about his dreams.

"Decided to join us, Harry?" asked Ginny, still stroking her hand through his hair.

"Yeah," he said, leaning back so he could look at her, "What time's it?"

After Crookshanks jumped off her lap Hermione checked her wristwatch and answered, "Just past eight o'clock."

Harry looked at her with surprise, "Only? It's still early. I could have sworn it was much later. Past ten at least."

"You're just tired from having to read all those soppy Valentine's all the girls sent you," teased Fred, leaning down against the back of the couch.

Both Ginny and Harry turned to glare at her brother, who was beaming benevolently down at them. Unfortunately neither of the two could deny his proclamation, since it was indeed Valentine's Day and Harry had received quite a fair number of cards and other tokens during the course of it. So for that matter had Ginny, to her surprise, although not to anyone else's.

The fact that Harry seemed highly embarrassed by the attention and Ginny highly frustrated of the perceived competition, merely provided the twins with additional ammunition.

"It's actually amazing you got that many," concurred George, standing beside his twin, "I would have thought most of them would have been intimidated by your forceful presence."

"Of course," continued Fred, grinning devilishly, "there's nothing to worry about. None of them could possibly be suicidal enough to try anything more. Not with our dear Gin Gin sending death glares towards any poor thing that tried to approach you today."

'Oooh, I can't believe him!'

Ginny audibly growled at them, "Are you really that eager to visit Madam Pomfrey again, dear brother?"

The freckles on the twins faces stood out starkly as they paled almost instantly and both were quick to raise their hands in appeasement and take a large step back.

"N-n-no need, Ginny," stuttered Fred, still backing away, "We were just - just teasing."

"Remember we have the Quidditch match against Ravenclaw soon," tried George.

Harry arched his eyebrows innocently at them, "That's not for another month, George. I'm sure you will be out of the Hospital Wing by then."

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The two brothers exchanged an alarmed look and quickly made their way to the stairs leading up to the boy's dormitories, loudly proclaiming their need to finish their Charms homework. The fact that it was Saturday and they had already finished all their homework that afternoon, did not seem to register anymore.

'If I had only known... I would have hit them years ago.'

Hermione had pulled her chair back and stood up, packing her things into her bag as she said, "Come on, Ginny. Let's head upstairs ourselves."

Ginny looked at her, puzzled, "Why? Like Harry said it's still early."

"Angelina and Becky wanted to arrange something," Hermione replied, "They didn't tell me what, but they did say we'd have fun. They've invited most of the older girls too."

"Is this some sort of Valentine's thing?" asked Ron, looking cautiously at Hermione as she lifted her bag and rounded the table they had been sitting at.

Hermione smiled and leaned down to peck Ron on the cheek, "I've already wished you a happy Valentine's, remember?"

Ron grinned broadly up at her, "Nuh-uh. Maybe you should remind me."

'Talk about saccharin sweet,' thought Ginny, watching as her friend and brother leaning in for a very intricate seeming exchange of... ugh. The thought of doing that with Harry sent shivers down Ginny's spine, but watching Ron and Hermione made her feel like gagging.

"Why is it they can do that?" Harry whispered to her, "Yet whenever we so much as try, someone or something interrupts us?"

"Bad timing," replied Ginny, sitting up. She graced him with a seductive smile, "Of course, since they're suddenly occupied, maybe we could try now?"

Before Harry could reply Hermione broke away from Ron and came to collect Ginny, pulling her off the couch and to her feet. As she was lead across the common room to the stairs, Harry groaned, "You were saying?"

'I should have known better.'

"Goodnight, Ginny," called Ron, "Don't let the monsters under the bed do anything bad to you, 'kay?"

"Bad? Oh, don't worry, Ron," she assured him, her eyes meeting Harry's as she started to climb the stairs after Hermione, "I'm sure the monsters could find far more interesting things to do with me."

Harry grinned as she was departing and simply told her, "Goodnight, Gin."

'What I wouldn't give for a goodnight kiss instead.'

"G'night, Harry."

\*\*\*

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAEEEEEEEEEEIIII!!!"

**\*Woo-hoo! They're naked!\***

'They are not! They're... they're... they're... oh boy.'

It had been about an hour and a half since Ginny and Hermione had retired upstairs, leaving Harry and

Ron to play a friendly game of chess. Over the past few months Harry had been pushing his friend relentlessly when it came to playing, using every trick he knew and a couple he borrowed off of Sun Tzu who was a true master of the game. Ron had improved dramatically and now won their games more often than not.

"Checkmate," Ron had grinned, making his move with a flourish and his grin broadening as his knight stepped forward and decapitated Harry's king.

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"Hmm. Interesting tactic," observed Harry, "A variation on Kerensky?"

Ron nodded, "Yep. Want to play another round?"

Harry shook his head, "No thanks."

Both boys looked around and saw that the common room was mostly deserted, apart from Neville, who was revising for his O.W.L.s and the pair of Seamus and Moira. The two were talking quietly and Seamus' Irish accent had come out to the point that he was almost as unintelligible as Moira.

"In that case," observed Ron, "I'm going to turn in early. You coming up?"

"Not just yet," demurred Harry, glancing towards the stairway leading up to the girl's dormitories. He smiled at his best friend, "I want to wish Ginny a happy Valentine's Day first."

Ron smiled back at him, remarkably at ease with the fact that Harry was nominally going out with his sister. It might have had something to do with Ginny pounding Fred and George into the dirt after having been interrupted the previous month, but Harry wasn't complaining.

Too much. There was still the annoying fact that whenever he and Ginny tried to kiss something would always present itself and break them apart.

'It's almost as if there were some higher power at work,' he mused, 'Trying to stop us.'

**\*Considering how frustrated it's making you, I'd suggest a lower power.\***

'Hey! No insinuations like that please!'

'Be careful, mate,' Ron told him as he made his way up the stairs, "Walking in on the girls unannounced could get you into trouble."

"I'll knock first," Harry had told him, before standing up and climbing the other set of stairs. He had quickly found the dormitory marked as belonging to the fourth-year girls, behind which he heard a great deal of chatter.

From the sound of it several girls from other years were present, though for what he could not guess. Harry knocked politely and, after a few seconds in which he received no reply, pulled on the door knob and swung the door inwards.

At which point he found himself in the current situation.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAEEEEEEEEEEIIIIII!"

Even with the enhanced abilities and senses the Order had given him, Harry was so surprised by what, not to mention who, stood before him, that he was only able to catch fleeting glimpses of scantily clad girls as his mind struggled to process what he had walked in on.

There was Alicia, ducking behind a post and the drapes of the nearest bed. Angelina reacting calmly to his intrusion and simply placing her hands on her hips. He had apparently caught Katie in-between changes and she vanished from sight behind the bed with a thump.

He had a brief glimpse of short mahogany hair as a sixth-year girl, Becky Silver, ducked into one of the large wardrobes. Unfortunately the wardrobe proved rather fuller than expected and Becky bounced back out and crashed to the floor in tangle of robes and dresses.

Carmen was further back in the room and fell onto her bed with a squeak and hurriedly pulled the drapes shut. A streak of long blonde hair that he thought was Lucy Ferrier disappeared behind some curtains with a high pitched squeal.

Harry barely paid any attention to Lavender, in something very pink and very lacy, and Parvati, who stood out in several vibrant shades of translucent yellow. Both girls gave shrill cries that would have done credit to a startled house-elf and also dove for cover. From the sound of it, and since they had dived behind the same bed, he figured they must have landed on top of Katie.

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Then amidst the general confusion that had engulfed the dormitory, Harry spotted Hermione, not far from where Katie had first been. The shimmering sky blue satin of her decidedly erotic knickers and suspender belt went well with the tan of her legs and stomach. The matching bra she was holding dropped to the floor as she squeaked loudly, reaching up to cross her arms in a belated attempt to cover her bare chest.

'Good thing Ron didn't see her like this,' was the first thought to cross Harry's mind upon seeing his best friend in such a state of undress, 'He'd have a heart attack!'

**\*I don't think he would complain.\***

A second thought occurred to him almost immediately after that, 'Good thing I'm not Ron or she'd have a heart attack as well.'

Then Harry's gaze slid to the girl standing next to Hermione, Ginny. She was standing, frozen in place, with an expression on her face that Harry had always imagined what "a deer in headlights" looked like. He only looked into her eyes for an instant before his eyes found themselves dropping lower and then lower once again.

His breath caught in his throat and Harry felt his thought processes grind to a screeching halt as his brain simply stopped working.

The material was black and hugged her lithe figure like a second skin, which in itself did bad things to Harry's nervous system. That it was also somewhat sheer, particularly the bra cups, only made matters that much worse. His eyes slowly wound their way back from where they had been directed at her

amazingly long and smooth legs, drifting over her flat, toned stomach and up to the soft swell of her breasts, where they froze in place.

Blushing such a bright shade of red she could have glowed in the dark, Ginny turned around and grabbed for her robes, which were lying on the bed. A deep, throaty groan escaped Harry when she did this. The view from the rear was just as heart stopping.

'Forget Ron and Hermione, I'm going to have a heart attack.'

Ginny turned back to face him, her school robes held in a bundle before her in an attempt to cover herself from his gaze. Harry stared into her wide chocolate eyes, wider than he had ever seen them, and wondered if there was enough magic in the world to prevent the blush he could feel rising to his cheeks.

**\*Don't think so, laddie.\***

**\*Who cares? You're in a room full o' half naked wenches!\***

'Oh God, I'm going to die.'

Several moments passed and Harry saw Carmen sticking her head out from inside the drapes of her bed, while Lucy ventured just her head out from behind the curtains. Becky, on the floor, seemed to have judiciously untangled most of herself from the assortment of clothes that had fallen over her. When Katie's head and shoulders emerged from behind the bed right in front of him, Harry wondered abstractly if this meant he had now seen more of Katie than George had. If so he resolved, he'd beg if necessary, to make absolutely certain George never found out.

"Harry," croaked Ginny, "Wh-what are you doing in here?"

"I was... going to ask you... something... something important..." he answered slowly. He was dimly aware that most of the girls not hiding behind the beds, primarily Angelina and to a lesser degree Hermione, were grinning knowingly at him. "I remember it was important... I can't remember what it was... but I remember it was important."

Harry tried to say more, but his mind wasn't functioning properly. He floundered about for a few seconds, shaking his head as he tried to speak. Finally he managed to articulate the first proper thought that came to his mind while confronted with a barely clothed Ginny.

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"I need a cold shower."

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Ginny had never felt so embarrassed in her life. For that matter, she could not recall having ever seen Harry look quite so embarrassed either, but that was a small consolation.

'Oh God, I'm never going to be able to look him in the face again.'

After spending several seconds staring at her in obvious horror, Harry had declared his need for a shower and fled the girl's dormitory as if Voldemort himself were chasing after him. Not that that would have posed much of a threat all things considered, but still.

"Ha ha ha ha," cried Angelina as the door slammed shut and Harry's footsteps retreated, "That poor boy! For a moment there I thought he was going to have a heart attack."

"Especially when he saw you, Ginny," agreed Hermione, although with a bit of squeak left in her voice and a definite flush to her cheeks.

Ginny glared at the other girls, wishing that for once the infamous Weasley blush would not rise to her cheeks. Her attempts however only sent them into further peals of laughter, despite the fact that Harry just perused their own assets in nothing more than the decidedly bedroom-only lingerie that Angelina and Becky had provided.

"Somehow I doubt either of you would find the situation as humorous had it been Fred or Ron," Ginny retorted, still trying to fight the blush.

"But it wasn't, was it?" replied Angelina, batting her eyelashes, "It was young Harry there, who's probably having trouble walking upright at the moment. No wonder the poor boy needs a shower!" Ginny stomped her foot angrily, "It's not funny!"

"Oh yes, it is," said Carmen, slinking out from behind her drapes, "Did you see the look on his face?"

"No doubt about it," agreed Lucy, leaving the cover of the curtains, "It's a miracle he didn't tear off what little you have on and ravage you right here!"

Ginny sank down on her bed and dropped her face into her hands. "Oh dear Merlin," she groaned, "Didn't any of you see how horrified he looked?"

Hermione sat down beside her and patted her on the shoulder, "It was kind of hard to miss, Ginny."

"That boy wants you so much I'm not surprised he ran like that," confirmed Parvati, rising off the floor, "He was probably afraid he wouldn't be able to control himself."

"He's Harry," retorted Ginny in protest, "He wouldn't do that!"

"He's a boy, dearie," replied Angelina, sitting down on her other side, "Confronted with a half naked young girl, especially one he likes so much, he could very well do that."

Katie grinned evilly, "We're talking from experience, aren't we, Ang?"

"Shut up!"

Ginny groaned and dropped her head back into her hands, "What I am going to do?"

"Go after him!" chorused almost every girl in the room.

"Come on, Ginny," prodded Becky, "You know you want to."

"Yeah," agreed Carmen, "Maybe you'll finally get to kiss him without being interrupted at the very last second."

'They have a point.'

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After leaving her dormitory and running to the fifth-year boy's room she quickly found out that Harry had not gone there for his shower. Leaving Ron, who seemed rather flustered that his baby sister was running around in such a state of undress, Ginny ran down to the common room. There she learned from Neville, as well as Seamus and Moira, that Harry had made a hurried departure out the portrait hole.

Running around Hogwarts after Harry in the dead of night, barefoot and in only her underwear and robes was probably the single craziest thing Ginny had ever done. Considering the situation, however, she could be forgiven for acting so impulsively.

It was something of a miracle that she managed to avoid Filch, Mrs Norris and the patrols of aurors now stationed at the school, but somehow she managed. After stealthily treading down the many corridors she reached the place she knew Harry had come to; the Prefect's bathroom.

"Pine-fresh," she announced and stepped through the door.

Harry had described the room for her while recounting the events of the previous year, during the Triwizard tournament. It was exactly as he had said it was, white marble and a pool-sized bath with hundreds of taps surrounding it. Harry was standing by the edge of the bath, watching as the water slowly pooled up and filled the bathing area.

"Ginny!" he exclaimed, whirling around to face her as she entered, "What are you doing here?"

"Well, I just wanted-" she haltingly replied, "I wanted to find out what it was you wanted to ask me when you - you know." He looked at her incredulously and then flushed a bright scarlet when she added, "And maybe we could finally manage a simple kiss without being interrupted."

"That would be a bad idea," he stated, "A very bad idea."

Ginny hoped the slight hurt she felt at his words did not show on her face. Working very hard she managed to prevent the quiver that was threatening to shake her voice and asked, "Why?"

Harry looked imploringly at her, a strained expression on his face, "Because right now, Ginny, there are so many things I want to do with you I don't think I could control myself if we got started."

'Now I really know why I love him.'

"Harry do you realise what you just said?" she asked with a small smile, closing the distance between them until they were almost touching, "You said 'with' me. Not 'to' me, but 'with' me. And that tells me what kind of a man you are. That even if we do nothing but stand here and talk for the rest of the night, I've made the right choice."

They were very close together now, Ginny could just feel the tips of her breasts brushing against Harry's chest as she snaked her arms around him and began caressing his back. Harry reciprocated in full and began tracing his fingers in delicious circles across her back with a feather-light touch that was sent shivers up and down her spine.

Eager to accomplish what they had thus far been unsuccessful with, Ginny leaning into Harry and tilted her head up to his lips. His arms tightened their grip and he pulled her against him, his lips brushing at her temple and slowly winding across her cheek and then along her jaw line.

He had just reached her chin and was sliding up to her mouth, with aching slowness, when without warning his arms released their hold on her and began flaying wildly about. Ginny looked up at him in surprise and consternation a moment before the realization of their predicament hit her.

Then, with the grace of a flying anvil, they fell in.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!"

#### **KER-SPLASH**

Ginny was spluttering about and trying to find her footing on the floor of the bath when Harry jerked up from below, sending a spray of water into the air. "For the love of all that's holy!" he cursed, smacking his fists into water, "What did we ever do to deserve this?! Tell me! What?!"

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As Harry continued to curse the gods, the heavens and just about every obscure deity known to exist, Ginny survey the Prefect's bathroom with a mixture of alarm and amusement. The fine white marble was littered with thousands, maybe millions, of cracks and fractures. The floors, the walls and the roof looked as though a large, angry and inebriated cave troll had been beating them with mallet.

The splendid and intricately wrought chandelier was wobbling and seemed in imminent danger of falling away from the fractured ceiling. The high glass windows had shattered and apparently shredded the white linen curtains into nothing more than rags. The fluffy white towels were similarly destroyed and the painting of the mermaid had fallen loose and was hanging from the wall at a sharp angle.

"It's going to take forever to fix all this," she groaned, drawing Harry's attention away from his increasingly profane cussing.

"Half an hour, maybe less," he said after taking a deep, calming breath, "If we get..."

As Harry's voice trailed off abruptly Ginny became aware of the fact that she was now utterly soaked from head to toe. This would not normally have been cause for much concern, however in her haste to locate Harry she had not firmly fastened the front of her robes before setting out after him. As a result her robes had parted in front and were giving him a close up view of her now even more clinging underwear.

'Well, at least he doesn't seem to be going red this time.'

"Ginny," Harry said in a breathless voice, "If you keep this up, I'm going to die of stress before the end of the year."

Wading her way through the water, Ginny pulled him into an embrace similar to the one they had been in before their fall. Harry, however, rested his hands on her hips instead and began to gently slide them

up until his palms were brushing the sides of her breast. Ginny's breath caught in her throat at his bold and intimate touch. She pushed up onto the tips of her toes and curled her arms around his neck, running one hand through the wet tangle of his hair and pulling his head towards her.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Harry," she whispered, her lips just brushing against his.

With a jerk Harry pulled his head away from her and glared off to one side. He snarled with pent up frustration and muttered vehemently under his breath, a curse of some sort that Ginny did not recognise. A moment later a high pitched wailed echoed forth from one of the taps, quickly fading away into nothingness.

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEAAAAaaaaaiiiii...!"

"What was that?" Ginny asked in surprise.

"Moaning Myrtle," replied Harry, turning back to her with a satisfied smile, "I just flushed her down the pipes and into the lake."

Ginny blinked and asked, "Moaning Myrtle? What was she doing here?"

"Apparently she likes to spy on the boy Prefects while we bathe," replied Harry with a shrug, "I almost forgot about her this time." He smiled at her and leaned close, once again, "Of course, I was distracted..."

His breath was hot against her flesh and Ginny knew that this time nothing would interrupt them. At least she hoped not. With the slow inevitability of two forces of nature clashing together, his lips finally, after so long, pressed against hers in that long awaited kiss.

And boy, was it a kiss.

The touch of his lips against hers was like lightning, what her father called eckeltricity, and it only got better as they increase the pressure. After what must have been only a few seconds, but felt like a lifetime, Harry's lips parted a fraction and he tentatively ran the tip of his tongue along her bottom lip. Without any hesitation Ginny opened her mouth to allow him entrance, her hands pulling him even closer to her as she did.

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'No wonder Ron and Hermione do this so much,' she thought as Harry held her tight against him, one hand between her shoulders, the other at the small of her back. It was incredible, the most amazing sensations were coursing through her as their tongues danced around each other, almost resembling their infrequent duels with sword and wand.

As their kiss continued and Ginny began to feel dizzy, whether from the act or the lack of oxygen she did not know, she revelled in his touch as well as his taste. She didn't know if Harry always held this flavour within him, but he tasted like... mint tea, with a hint of chocolate.

Finally, after an eternity and more, they drew back and parted, Harry pulling playfully on her bottom lip as he left her. They stood there, in the bath, for an age. Their breaths were coming fast and shallow and both were flushed with excitement and desire.

"You taste good," Ginny said, after her heartbeat eventually slowed to something like normal.

"So do you," Harry told her, kissing her quickly on the tip of her nose, "Like honey with a dash of cinnamon."

Ginny grinned and then surveyed the room, "Looks like we won't have to stay here for very long anymore."

Amazingly, probably in a magical backwash from their pleasure, the damage done to the bathroom had repaired itself. The cracks in the marble had sealed over, the chandelier hung firmly from the ceiling, the windows were whole and the curtains unshredded. The only thing left to be done was to hang the fallen picture of the mermaid back in its proper place.

"In that case," purred Harry, nuzzling her neck, "We'll have to find another excuse to stay in here for a little longer."

"Only a little longer?" she asked with a playful pout.

Harry grinned down at her, "Well, at least until Valentine's Day is over."

Ginny arched her eyebrows and teasingly pointed out, "That gives us a couple of hours."

"My point exactly."

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## 18. The Ides of March

"Players; mount your brooms!"

Madam Hooch's whistle sounded and the two teams kicked off the pitch and into the air. Harry peeled off to the right, streaking across the field at a brisk clip. Out the corner of his eye he could make out Katie snatching the Quaffle away from the Ravenclaw Chasers and streaking towards the distant goals. "Bell's got the Quaffle," announced Lee Jordan from the stands, "Ducks under Turpin and passes to Johnson. She's looking fine that girl is--"

"Jordan!"

Harry smiled and as he listened to Lee's commentating, all the while scanned the Quidditch pitch for any sign of the Golden Snitch. It was mid March and the sky was blanketed in a layer of low hanging pewter grey clouds despite the onset of spring, hiding the sun and making the elusive ball all the more difficult to spot. Floating high above the other players Harry felt her coming up alongside him before he saw her.

"You're looking rather pleased with yourself, Harry," noted Cho, using only one hand to steer her Comet 260 close by him.

"Just appreciating Lee working the crowd," he admitted, "Unless by some miracle the game doesn't finish, today's the last time we'll be hearing him."

It was the final match of the Hogwarts Quidditch season. Slytherin had never managed to recover from their humiliating defeat at the hands of Gryffindor and had subsequently lost their match against Ravenclaw and only just managed to tie with Hufflepuff. Ravenclaw had beaten Hufflepuff during February, on Valentine's day in fact, and were currently ranked second, behind Gryffindor.

*'They have to beat us by one hundred and sixty points to win the cup,'* thought Harry, watching as Fred tried to dismount the Ravenclaw Keeper just as Angelina shot at the goals.

"Alicia Spinnet scores the first points of the match!" exulted Lee, "Ten-Zero to Gryffindor!"

"Somehow I doubt anyone besides the Gryffindors are going to miss him that much," noted Cho wryly, "He certainly is..."

"Eccentric?" finished Harry with a knowing grin, "That he is."

The two Seekers continued to slowly circle above the pitch, talking, but still keeping an eye out for the elusive Snitch.

"So how's poor Neville doing?" asked Harry after a while, "I didn't see him this morning."

"What do you mean, 'poor Neville'?" asked Cho in return, a concerned frown marring her elegant features.

Harry grinned at her and explained, "He was almost having a panic attack last night. He didn't know if he should be supporting Gryffindor with the rest of the house, or Ravenclaw since he's now your boyfriend. He was trying to convince Hermione to clone him so he could do both!"

Cho was completely flummoxed by this statement and even began to blush a delicate pink when a loud, undulating wail rang out. It cut through the air as loud and clear as a foghorn, only going on and on without any apparent end in sight.

"What in the nether hells is that?" shouted Cho, covering her ears.

***\*Now who was it that told us Voldemort would never attack during a game of Quidditch?\****

Harry growled at the voice's sarcastic tone and replied, "Please tell me that isn't the alarm I think it is."

***\*Okay, we can do that.\****

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***\*I don't think it will help though.\****

*'Damn, I can already feel them. I better let Dumbledore know.'*

***\*I think you'd better let everyone know.\****

The blaring siren call had been sounding for a full minute when it abruptly tapered off, leaving the echoes sounding throughout the hills and around the castle. Harry could see everyone looking around in confusion and mixed amounts of alarm. The fifty or so aurors stationed about the pitch were looking particularly twitchy at this interruption.

With a tight set to his mouth Harry swooped down to the teacher's box, where Dumbledore was sitting. All the professors were looking around in confusion, the headmaster included, trying to distinguish the reason for the loud sound that had so unexpectedly startled them all.

"We're under attack."

***\*Oh really? We'd never have guessed.\****

***\*Shut up! This is important.\****

The words caught the attention of every single person in the box as if emphasised by a gunshot.

Dumbledore turned to Harry with a surprised expression and asked, "Under attack? Could you explain what you mean by that, please, Harry?"

Harry nodded sharply, "After the attack on Hogsmeade I placed detection wards around Hogwarts to a radius of five miles. That alarm means that more than a specified number of Death Eaters or other possible enemies have entered range. We're going to be under attack."

"What is this 'specified number'?" asked Snape, looking snidely at him.

***\*Insufferable git.\****

*'I've been saying that since practically the moment I met him.'*

"Fifty in total," replied Harry, meeting the Potions Master's glare with a level gaze.

Dumbledore's eyes widened in surprise and he exchanged a look with Professor McGonagall. With a shake of his head he turned to face the rest of the spectators sitting throughout the stadium, all of them watching Harry and him closely.

"This is Professor Dumbledore," he boomed, "Hogwarts is under imminent attack! All students are to proceed quickly and quietly to the Great Hall. Teachers-"

He was cut off by Harry, who motioned him sharply into silence and then cast a Sonorus Charm on himself, "Belay that! All students are to head directly to the Practical Fighting Techniques auditorium at the end of the third floor corridor. Head directly there without stopping anywhere along the way. Prefects shall make sure to escort any third-years and younger that may not know the route. All the teachers and aurors will make a sweep of the school for any stragglers."

Harry paused for a moment, waiting for it to sink in. He could see the nervous shiftings about from everyone present, clearing wondering if this was some great hoax or the like. Opposite him, in the Gryffindor section, he could see most of his housemates gaping at him with wide eyes and open mouths.

*'I'm going to talk to Dumbledore later about holding drills for this sort of thing.'*

Ginny, Ron and Hermione on the other hand were already in motion, hurrying along in an attempt to get around the stadium to where he was now floating. No matter that he had just ordered them and everyone else to make for the PFT room, they were coming to stand by his side.

**"Move!"**

His bold exhortation finally got a response out of the crowds and the people started to exit the Quidditch stadium as quickly as they could. Harry could see his fellow Prefects, as well as the

scattered aurors, trying to direct the flow of traffic.

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"We don't have a lot of time," he said, looking about as though scenting the air, "They're coming."

"What are, Potter?" asked McGonagall, gripping Dumbledore tightly by the arm, "What's coming?"

Harry's answer was a chilling, single word.

"Dementors."

\*\*\*

"Why'd you bring us down here instead of the Great Hall, Harry?"

They were now in the Practical Fighting Techniques auditorium, where Harry was standing near the middle of the stage, with Ginny to his left, and Ron and Hermione to his right. Almost all of the Hogwarts students had arrived and now they were only waiting for the last of the aurors and teachers to come in.

Harry glanced over at Hermione and answered, "Once locked down this room is the safest place on the planet. Practically impregnable."

"I've never liked the word 'impregnable.'" The four students turned to face Dumbledore, who had come up behind them, accompanied by Professors McGonagall, Lupin and Snape. Padding along at their feet, to Snape's obvious displeasure, was Snuffles. "Far too similar to 'unsinkable' for my liking."

"What's wrong with 'unsinkable'?" asked McGonagall with raised eyebrows.

Dumbledore smiled mysteriously, "Nothing. As the iceberg said to the Titanic."

Hermione chuckled at the black humour, but Harry turned back to watch over the assembled students and aurors, all of whom were now present. "Don't worry about it," he said, "I've got a handle on the situation."

"You seem confident," observed Lupin.

"Of course I do," Harry replied, "It wouldn't help us all that much if I was running around like a headless chicken, screaming, 'Aaaaaaeeeii! We're all going to die!'"

Ron leaned close to Hermione and whispered, "If he was headless... how would he be screaming?"

*'Oh, honestly!'*

Hermione elbowed him, non too gently, in the ribs and shushed him with an accompanying glare as Harry turned around to face them. His face was as serious as she had ever seen him, his lips set in a thin line and his eyes hooded in foreboding shadows.

*'I've never seen him like this,' she thought, 'Not even after the attack on Hogsmeade.'*

"Besides," he continued, "I've made enough modifications to Hogwarts over the past couple of months that the odds are definitely stacked in our favour."

"Modifications? What in Merlin's name are you talking about?" asked Snape bitingly, seeming very annoyed by both Sirius' presence and Harry's defacto assumption of command.

*'I'm curious about that myself.'*

"Hogwarts' defences are just that; defences," explained Harry patiently, "Passive defences, designed to protect those inside the school, no more. They do not follow the basic tenet that the best defence is a strong offence. Until now that is."

McGonagall crossed her arms and peered at him over the rims of her glasses, "Just what exactly have you done, Potter?"

"I gave the school's defences teeth. Sharp teeth," Harry smiled wolfishly at them and added, almost as an afterthought, "And a few other surprises."

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He motioned them to take a few steps back and then moved to stand on the centre tile covering the auditorium's stage. His smile unnerved Hermione in how similar it was to that particular one that Fred and George would display every so often.

*'What exactly has he been up to?'* she wondered, receiving a reply that she would never have imagined if she lived to be a thousand.

"Activate Situation Map!"

A second passed in silence and then everyone standing on or next to the stage, except Harry, jumped in surprise. The stone floor seemed to ripple and shift beneath them, changing from a dull slate grey to a light creamy colour, like old and faded parchment. From the centre tile streaks of blue, red, green and black exploded across the smooth surface.

The thin lines intersected and crossed back and forth, in a particularly intricate and familiar pattern near the centre, and very quickly a picture of what was happening started to become apparent to those watching in amazement.

*'Looks like the Marauders have left one heck of a legacy.'*

And that they had.

\*\*\*

*'Holy Hannah, it's a giant Marauder's Map!'*

Ron, along with everyone else, was gaping at the gigantic map now laid out at their feet. In the centre was a complete floor plan of the castle. There was the lake, the Forbidden Forest, all of Hogsmeade and more. If he were to guess, Ron would have estimated the map covered everything within four or five miles of the school, centred on the PFT auditorium.

As with the Marauder's Map hundreds of tiny labelled dots were displayed across the floor, most of them clustered within the auditorium.

"Hey!" exclaimed Ron, pointing off to one side of the Forbidden Forest, not far from where he was standing on the map, "I can see my dad's car!"

He bent down low and examined the rather large purple blob that was roaming slowly about, it's name

and a short description trailing behind it. Looking closer Ron blinked as he realized that the label seemed to actually be floating in the air above the map, rather than being displayed on its surface.

#### **FORD ANGLIA**

##### **Motor Car (wild)**

"That's right. I'm surprised it's so close, actually," mentioned Harry with a smug grin, "When I was building and testing the Map I noticed that it usually roams much deeper in the forest. I suppose whatever triggered the alarms must have caused it stray."

*'Why on earth didn't he tell us about this thing?'*

"How far does this map extend, Harry?" asked Lupin, sounding somewhat awed.

Harry grinned broadly despite the seriousness of the situation, "Five miles. Just a bit further than the detection wards I set up after Christmas. I'm working on the principal that bigger is better. Of course, it can be scaled down to a mile radius as well; for closer work."

"You've added some improvements as well, I see," noted Dumbledore, looking down at the dots inside the castle.

"Yes. Witches and wizards are black. Ghosts are pale blue. Magical creatures are green. Enchanted objects are purple," explained Harry.

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Everyone, that being Ron, Hermione, Ginny and the four professors and Snuffles, crowded around that part of the map. Peering intently at the dots Ron recognised many names, as well as his own and Hermione's, but it was Harry's name that stood out the most amongst the rest. Surrounding his best friend's dot was a glowing white circle, then a gleaming golden circle and then another glowing white circle.

#### **HARRY J POTTER**

##### **Wizard: Order of the Phoenix**

Ron did a double take after a moment when he realized that Ginny's dot was likewise encircled in white, gold and white. The description underneath her name was also the same as Harry's, which caused everyone to give her a strange glance as they noticed.

#### **VIRGINIA S WEASLEY**

##### **Witch: Order of the Phoenix**

*'She and Harry certainly didn't mention anything about this.'*

Ron and Hermione's dots were simply described as wizard and witch respectively, as was everyone else. There were only five exceptions that Ron could immediately see, the first being Dumbledore, to Harry's immediate left. His tiny black dot was surrounded by a single gleaming silver circle.

#### **ALBUS A DUMBLEDORE**

##### **Wizard: Headmaster**

"Dear Lord," Ron heard Snape breath in what sounded like horror, "It can detect the Mark."

Sure enough, Snape's dot was distinguished from the others by a thin black circle, then a sickly green circle and then another black circle. In fact his dot looked more like a tiny skull than a round dot and his description was also different, appended with two words that explained everything.

#### **SEVERUS SNAPE**

##### **Wizard: Death Eater**

"Well, we don't have to worry about spies for Voldemort anymore," observed Ginny, trying to divert attention away from her own dot. "At least not proper Death Eaters."

Standing alongside Snape were McGonagall and Lupin's dots, also surrounded by a single circle, but in different colours. The Deputy Headmistress' circle was a royal blue and her description likewise had an addition to it.

#### **MINERVA McGONAGALL**

##### **Witch: Animagus - Feline (grey)**

Lupin's dot was encircled in a leafy green that was explained by;

#### **REMUS J LUPIN**

##### **Wizard: Lycanthrope**

And there, next to Lupin's dot, was another dot with a blue circle just like McGonagall's.

#### **SIRIUS T BLACK**

##### **Wizard: Animagus - Canine (black)**

"Sirius Tee Black?" asked Remus quietly, looking in astonishment at his old friend. Sirius, despite still being in canine form, looked exceedingly embarrassed. The large shaggy dog whined pathetically for a moment before thinking better of it and then growled at Remus in warning.

"After the debacle with Crouch and Crouch Jr last year, I made sure the Situation Map was a lot more specific than the Marauder's Map," explained Harry, turning away from the map of the school and looking over the part showing the Forbidden Forest. "Highlight alarm incursion."

A large glowing yellow circle suddenly appeared deep in the forest, at the very edge of the map.

Everyone walked up to the highlighted area. None of them could repress a grimace at the sight that greeted them there.

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*'No wonder the alarms went off.'*

As Harry had said earlier, it was Dementors. Lots of Dementors. Hundreds of them were crowded around in a clearing about four and a half miles within the forest. Their sickly green dots were drifting about in small groups of five or six as other dots representing other kinds of dark creatures wove between them.

"Still think the odds are in our favour, Potter?" asked Snape, "There must be nearly two hundred

Dementors here. That's almost the entire compliment from Azkaban."

Harry smirked and motioned at the map, "You forgot to mention the mountain, cave and forest trolls. About fifty of those from what I can tell. Not to mention the acromantulas."

"Spiders?" asked Ron, feeling the blood draining from his face.

"Yeah," confirmed Ginny, pointing to one side of the clearing, "A couple of dozen at least. Voldemort must have promised them a free meal."

"In other words; us," summed up Hermione, looking worriedly at Ron.

"Spiders?"

Harry was looking speculatively at the map, a frown on his brow. After a few moments he nodded and pointed to the centre of the clear, "I think this is just a preliminary attack. He's only testing our defences. Seeing what we're capable of."

McGonagall looked at where he was indicating and asked, "What makes you say that?"

"He has only five Death Eaters accompanying him," noted Dumbledore, stroking his beard.

"Exactly," agreed Harry.

Ron was now paying attention to the details displayed at their feet, his mind already working on cataloguing what they were up against. A growl from Snuffles made him take a closer look as the six wizards marked in the clearing. He immediately recognized the names of three of the Death Eaters; Malfoy, MacNair and Pettigrew. But it was Voldemort's dot that drew his attention.

*'Now this is... disturbing.'*

**TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE**

**Unknown: Death Eater**

"Why's Vo - er, You-Know-Who listed as unknown?" he asked after a moment thought.

Harry unconsciously rubbed the crook of his right elbow and grimaced, "He's not exactly human anymore. He's something... else. Something worse."

Hermione motioned at map, "They're starting to move."

*'Spiders? Oh heck.'*

\*\*\*

"Activate Hogwarts Defences."

Harry's words were immediately followed by a deep rumble that reverberated throughout the auditorium. A strange feeling enveloped Ginny, as if her feet were about to lift off the floor.

*'It feels like I'm diving on a broom.'*

"This feels like - like a Muggle elevator," muttered Hermione, looking questioningly at Harry, "We're going down? Beneath the castle?"

"Yes," confirmed Harry with a nod, "When the defences are activated this room descends five hundred yards underground. We're completely inaccessible from the outside."

One of the aurors, who had strode onto the stage, glared furiously at him, "Then how in Hades are we supposed to do *anything* if we're completely cut off?"

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Dumbledore placed a calming hand on the auror's shoulder and said, "Calm down, Thomas. I believe Harry said that we are only inaccessible from the outside. Not the inside."

"But how do we get out?" asked another auror, this one sounding much calmer than her compatriot. "I mean, even so far down we're still inside the Hogwarts anti-apparation wards."

"And there's an additional anti-apparation ward around the auditorium as well," admitted Harry, his grin broadening as the two aurors looked dumbstruck. "Even if the school's wards were to come down, this room has a completely separate set of protective wards and barriers."

"So how do we get out, Harry?" asked Ginny, thinking that this certainly explained his fatigue over the last few months. Even with the power supplied by the Order, putting all this together was no small task.

*'How did he manage to do it without anyone noticing?' she wondered, 'He's hardly ever left alone these days.'*

The rumbling had finally stopped as Harry indicated towards the rear wall of the auditorium, where several large cabinets had risen up from the floor. Or perhaps it had been the room that had lowered itself down to their level. In any case, Harry strode to the central and largest of the cabinets and swung its doors open.

"With these," he declared.

Hanging within the cabinet, tucked closely together, was a mass of brightly coloured rings. They were made of some sort of plastic and were about a metre across and as thick around as Ginny's thumb. She exchanged a mystified look with her brother, who shrugged with equal puzzlement.

"Muggle hoolah hoops?" asked Hermione, identifying the strange objects by name if not purpose.

*'What use would even Muggle find for these things?'* wondered Ginny, utterly perplexed.

"Portkeys," corrected Harry, "Each one easily capable of accommodating a dozen people without crowding. A hundred of them in all. Just hold one in your hands and say 'deliver us from evil' and you'll be taken to a safe location."

Lupin had plucked one of the hoolah hoops from the cabinet and was inspecting it with a critical eye. He looked up from the portkey and asked, "A safe location? Where?"

"The promenade courtyard outside the auror headquarters building at the Ministry," supplied Harry with a smirk directed at the stumped aurors. "They're one use only, so there is no need to worry about anyone using them to get in. Besides, I included a translocation barrier around the auditorium as well. We can portkey out, but not in."

The female auror stepped forward again, "But if we're transported all the way to the Ministry, You-Know-Who will have free run of the school before we can get back." She waved a hand at the rows of hoolah hoops, "You've given us a wonderful way out, but there's no way for us to hold the school against his attack."

Ginny looked at Harry, whose smirk seemed to broaden. Seeing the gleam in his eyes, she just knew that this was all only the tip of the proverbial iceberg. He turned back to the centre of the stage and said in an authoritative voice, "Scale to one mile radius."

There was an immediate reaction as the a map of Hogwarts blossomed to several times its prior size and finer details became apparent. The dots representing those within the castle were now more readily discernable at a glance. But there was something that caught Ginny's eye beyond these changes, something about Hogwarts that was different.

"What in the world?" asked McGonagall, looking at the map in consternation, "Every entrance, exit and window has been... sealed off."

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"The barrier shields are a metre thick and made from layers of granite and basalt," Harry explained, circling around in what Ginny recognised as his lecturing mode, "The outermost layer is also coated in an interwoven mesh of quartz, diamond and copper that can either absorb or reflect a wide variety of energies and spells."

Dumbledore looked impressed, "So Voldemort is now unable to enter the school, even though we are not able to defend it from our current position."

Harry grinned, "I never said that. Look at the ramparts. They're still clear, just like the Founders designed them for. All you need are these." He had made his way back to the rear cabinets and opened the one next to the evacuation portkeys. Inside were what looked like several hundred thick gold bracelets, arrayed in neat rows.

"Jewellery?" asked Snape, "These are going to help us defend the school?"

"They are not simple bracelets, my friend," announced Dumbledore with a gleam in his eyes, "If I am not mistaken, these too are portkeys. Ones that will transport us back to the surface and within the now sealed halls of Hogwarts."

Harry confirmed Dumbledore's words with a nod, "Precisely. Just say 'deploy' while you're wearing one and it will key you into the Great Hall. If you're in trouble or injured, say 'evacuate' and you'll be taken to the Ministry like the others. You'll also be able to hear whatever anyone else wearing one says."

The male auror, Thomas, frowned, "So once we use them to get back out, there's no way for us to get back inside here?"

"If you're wearing a portkey you can be *brought* back in by someone that's already here," replied Harry, "Whoever's running the show down here just has to touch your dot with their wand and say 'retrieve' and voila. It's the only exception to the translocation barrier."

"Good idea," said Ron, "It means that the Death Eaters can't steal one and use it to get inside."

"The command system is specifically keyed to select individuals, so any infiltrators won't be able to override anything." Harry pulled a reasonable thick, crisp and new book from a draw set within the cabinet, and handed it to Ron, "Read this. It's a manual explaining all the features and how to control them."

Ron took the book and looked down at it in surprise, "Why're you giving it to me?"

Ginny saw Hermione roll her eyes, "Honestly, Ron, isn't it obvious? Harry said that only certain people can use these new defences. You're one of them."

Harry nodded, "Most of you are, actually. Besides myself only Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Professor McGonagall and Professor Dumbledore can use it. More people can be added later, the procedure is in the book."

"Why are you giving it to me then?" asked Ron, "Why not the Professors?"

"I haven't been honing your chess game for the fun of it, Ron," explained Harry, "You're going to be coordinating our strategy from down here while the rest of us do the dirty work."

Ginny smiled at her brother as the blood drained out of his face and the book dropped from his numb fingers. '*Funny how he seems more afraid of staying here than going out and fighting.*' she mused as Ron sputtered a feeble protest.

Harry's eyes were almost glowing in the subdued light of the auditorium as he slipped one of the portkey bracelets around his wrist and started handing them out to the others. His expression was a mixture of the excitement that coursed through his veins before and during playing Quidditch and the grim determination he had exhibited after the attack on Hogsmeade.

*'God, I can literally feel the power radiating from him.'*

"I think it's time Voldemort and I had nice, quiet chat."

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## 19. Know Your Enemy

They were close. From over the rampart high up on the Astronomy Tower, Harry could make out the moving shadows amidst the darkness of the Forbidden Forest. The steely grey clouds hung low in the air above the school and a chill had descended in the hour it taken for Voldemort and his minions to wind their way to Hogwarts.

***\*This is an unnatural cold, Harry.\****

***\*It penetrates through skin, flesh and bone down to your very soul.\****

*'It's the Dementors,'* decided Harry, *'So many of them. Coming to feed.'*

Harry turned from looking out over the forest to inspect the assembly of defenders now arrayed across the battlements of the castle. It had taken some convincing on Dumbledore's part, with help from McGonagall, Flitwick and Lupin, but the aurors stationed at Hogwarts were cooperating with regards to Harry's plans for the upcoming battle.

Thomas Nitta, the senior auror, and his second in command, Leanne Van Walten, had acquiesced to the headmaster's wishes and were deploying according to Ron's orders. The fifty one aurors were spaced out more-or-less evenly across the castle wall, interspersed with those teachers and students that had volunteered to help fight. It was mostly seventh and sixth-year students that had come out, but there were a fair number of fifth and fourth-years, mostly from those who regularly attended Practical Fighting Techniques.

*"You know, this is almost disappointing."*

Ron's disembodied voice echoed and made Harry smile, "Why do you say that?" He could imagine his friend, safely ensconced far beneath the castle, gesticulating at the map and at Voldemort's approaching minions.

*"There's absolutely no order to You-Know-Who's forces," observed Ron. "At least none that I can see. They're either hiding their strategy very well, or whoever's in charge doesn't have a clue when it comes to organizing his forces."*

"Harry?" a hand came to rest on his shoulder, "Are you alright?"

He turned to face Remus and Sirius, his scarlet and gold Quidditch robes swishing loudly in the silence hanging over the area. Since none of the aurors were stationed on the tower Sirius had temporarily returned to his human form, his eyes sparkling with worry.

"I'll be alright," he replied, "It's you I worry about."

Sirius scowled and shook his head, his long hair whipping about from the movement. Next to him Remus laughed lightly and patted his old friend on the back, "Nothing ever changes I see."

Harry smiled and exchanged a bemused look with Ginny, who was standing near the stairwell. He returned his attention to his godfather, "Try not to get yourself killed."

"I'm not going to die," asserted Sirius with icy certainty.

"Really?" asked Remus, arching his eyebrows, "You sound awfully certain about that."

A look of grim determination settled of Sirius' harsh features and a frightening gleam entered his piercing blue eyes. He bared his teeth in a silent snarl and growled, "I'm going to live long enough to catch and kill Peter Pettigrew first."

***\*This godfather of yours is a dangerous man.\****

*'That he is.'*

"Remus?" it was Ron, *"If you're finished talking with Harry, can you and Snuffles get to your positions by the North Tower?"*

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Remus nodded and, after clapping Harry on the shoulder, made his way to the stairs. Sirius looked after his friend and then engulfed Harry in a bear hug. Just when Harry thought he would need to pry Sirius free to breathe again, Sirius pulled back.

"You be careful now, understand?"

"Don't worry so much. Killing me isn't going to help them," assured Harry. After a moment thought he smiled mirthlessly, "Of course, come to think about it, it's not going to help *me* all that much either."

Sirius nodded and backed away to the stairs, changing into Snuffles as he reached Lupin's side. The two quickly wound their way down, leaving only Harry and Ginny standing up on the tower. Harry looked worriedly at her, standing there with her robes pulled tight around her.

***\*She seems distracted.\****

"You okay, Gin?" he asked softly, moving to stand by her.

"Not really," she replied, "I keep thinking about my first year. The diary."

Harry nodded his understanding and gently took her in his arms, holding her close to him. With a shudder she buried her face against his chest and clung to him. "It's the Dementors," he said as he slowly rocked back and forth.

She shivered in his arms, "I know. I remember how it was when they were here searching for Sirius. But this time is worse."

"I think they were holding back then," replied Harry, "because of Dumbledore."

"At least this time I have something to fight them off with."

Harry smiled and kissed the crown of her head, "I hear your Patronus is quite spectacular, even if I haven't been able to convince Professor Lupin to tell me what it is."

She pulled back slightly and grinned up at him, a slight blush on her cheeks, "You'll be seeing it soon enough, Mr Potter. Patience is a virtue, try to remember that."

"I tend to forget myself around you, Ms Weasley," he replied, leaning to kiss her softly.

Ginny looked up at him, her warm chocolate eyes wide and glistening, "Please tell me everything's going to be alright. I don't want anything to happen to you."

***\*You do have some idea about what you're going to do, don't you?\****

*'Not a clue. I'm making this up as I go.'*

"Don't worry, Gin. I know almost exactly what I'm doing."

\*\*\*

"I think I'm going to throw up."

Hermione nodded her agreement to Neville's words and said, "You and me both."

She, along with Neville and Cho, had been stationed by Ron along the ramparts, between Professor

McGonagall and one of the aurors, a man called Curtis. Apparently Ron, although he had not said anything, had specifically planned for Neville and Cho to be together. Everyone in Gryffindor was seemingly delighted by their budding relationship, especially after Neville's minor panic attack the previous evening.

*'Only Ron would try to continue playing matchmaker during an attack by You-Know-Who.'*

Most of the students participating in the defence had been grouped in twos and threes, spread out between the many aurors and scattered teachers. Very few of them had any proficiency in casting a Patronus Charm, less than a dozen of them actually, so Ron had assigned them the task of keeping the trolls and acromantulas at bay while the teachers and aurors dealt with the Dementors.

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"I just wish I had more than a half descent Patronus," muttered Cho, watching as the Dementors drifted in the shadows at the edge of the forest.

"I wish I *had* a half descent Patronus," retorted Neville.

Since the attack on Hogsmeade during Christmas and the news that the Dementors had abandoned their posts, Professor Lupin had been drilling all his students on the Patronus Charm. Every year from first up until seventh were had been going over the spell for the past two months, even if most could barely produce more than a fine mist or sparks.

In fact, most of the school were spending more time in Defence Against Dark Arts than any other subject. Subjects such as History of Magic, Astronomy, Ancient Runes, Arithmancy and Divination had all suffered heavy losses those students that could pulled out. Divination had been particularly hard hit.

*'As I have always said; a pointless class.'*

According to Lavender and Parvati, the only Gryffindor fifth-years still taking the subject, Trelawney was livid. Apparently she was blaming Harry personally for the decline in attendance.

"Mine's not that good," downplayed Cho.

"It's better than mine or Neville's," replied Hermione, "At least you manage to give it some shape, mine's just a fine mist."

"At least you get a mist," moaned Neville dejectedly.

"Pay attention!" snapped Curtis, who had been listening with half an ear, "Here they come."

\*\*\*

*"Steady. Steady,"* urged Ron's voice, *"Wait for it."*

Voldemort's small army had finally cleared the edge of the Forbidden Forest, the tall black forms of the Dementors gliding silently towards Hogwarts. Ginny watches as the foul creatures detached from the shadows and slowly began to approach.

*"Wait. Wait."*

Though nobody other than herself and Professor Lupin had seen it, Ginny's Patronus was possibly the most powerful one in the school, save Harry's of course. Because of this, and her obvious connection to the Order of the Phoenix, Ginny had not been grouped with any other students. Instead she had been partnered with Professor Flitwick and was located in the centre of the line of aurors stretching across the ramparts.

*'He would match me up with a duelling master.'*

Ron had not been happy with the decision, but had eventually agreed with it. Fred and George, a dozen or so yards down the line, had been even more vocal in their protests. Dumbledore and Harry had insisted, however, and they too had backed down.

*"Steady. Line up your targets."*

More nervous than she had ever been in her life, except perhaps during the previous summer when she had written to Harry and sent him a present for his birthday, Ginny aimed her wand down at the advancing mass of Dementors. She licked her lips and tried to ignore the churning of her stomach and the pressing cold that was gnawing at her.

*"NOW!!!"*

Shouts of "Expecto Patronum!" rang out across the battlements and silver shapes, large and small, sprang forth, charging down to the grounds.

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Ginny had first attempted the Patronus Charm during her duel with Harry after the Christmas holidays.

Then, before Professor Lupin's lessons and some tips from Harry and several teachers, her Patronus had been just more than a fine mist. A weak web of silver, run through with gold, that could barely hold a Dementor back.

Now, after countless hours of practice, it was much, much more.

"Expecto Patronum!" she cried, concentrating on the wonderful, overwhelming, feeling of joy and completeness she had felt that first time, and every time since, that she and Harry had kissed.

It was a man, sitting astride a broomstick and bedecked in Quidditch Robes as well as pads and gloves.

He was awash in gleaming, flickering silver that could outshine a full moon. He was, as anyone familiar with the sport could tell, a Seeker. And clustered around him, glowing so bright that they were hard to look at, were a dozen Golden Snitches.

*'Now that everyone's finally seen him, the twins are never going to let me live this down.'*

Her Patronus streaked through the air as silver blur, surrounded by glowing gold orbs, and cut a swathe through the ranks of the Dementors. Following closely behind the Seeker, coming from the Astronomy Tower, were three giant golden forms. Harry's Patroni drove a wedge into the Dementors, tearing apart anything that got before them.

Ginny watched as Prongs, the giant stag, impaled a Dementor with his antlers and threw his head back,

tossing the vile creature high into the air. The Dementor crashed heavily to the ground and exploded in black and dark blue fire, burnt to ashes and shadow in a bare instant. As the same time Prongs reared up on his hind legs and shattered another Dementor's head with a blow from his powerful front legs. He dropped back down and cantered to one side, swinging his head to impale another Dementor. Moony the werewolf tore the legs out from one Dementor and leapt upon it as it fell, tearing viciously at this fallen creature. If Dementors had proper throats, then that is what he tore at with his gleaming fangs, pouncing away and onto another Dementor as the one beneath him burst into flames and disintegrated.

She saw her Seeker sweep past, one arm held out stiff and smashing against a Dementor's chest as the Golden Snitches tore through another. The Dementor he had, she thought the term was clothes lined, knocked to the ground was immediately set upon by the hulking form of Padfoot, who tore at its robes and flailing limbs.

*'They work well together. Like a well practiced team.'*

After several minutes most of the Patroni that had been fighting the Dementors began to lose their brilliant sheen and faded away. The three Marauders and Ginny's Seeker and Snitches lasted much longer than any of the others, battling against the Dementors until they too were finally overwhelmed by their prey.

"Hoohoo!" exclaimed Professor Flitwick happily, "I'd say we got thirty of them! At least thirty, don't you think?"

Ginny smiled at this, aware of the awed look the auror to her right was giving her. Her Patronus, along with Harry's, had easily accounted for at least half that number, maybe even a two thirds of it.

*"Which still leaves over two hundred and twenty,"* chided Ron's voice, *"Don't count your owls before they hatch, professor. Ready a second volley, if you can, on my order!"*

She looked up at the Astronomy tower just in time to see Snape push Harry over the edge.

\*\*\*

Falling through the air Harry was disconcertedly reminded of the few times he fallen from his broom whilst playing Quidditch. Only this time he had deliberately allowed himself to be sent hurtling towards the ground.

***\*I sincerely hope this little stunt doesn't get you killed.\****

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*'That makes two of us.'*

***\*Slightly more than that actually. You forgot about the rest of the Order.\****

With a twist and a deft spin, Harry flipped head over heels only an instant before the ground rushed up to meet him. He landed nimbly on his feet, crouched low with his hands out for support and showing no more effort than if he had rolled off his bed.

All action on the battlefield spread out before him seemed to come to a halt as he looked up and faced a surprised Voldemort and his four companion Death Eaters. The dark lord was instantly recognisable by his tall, skinny frame and his pale mockery of a face. The Death Eaters were cloaked in black and hidden behind their masks, but he recognised the stances of the two standing to either side of Voldemort.

*'I don't see Wormtail anywhere,'* noted Harry as he slowly stood up, *'I guess he's not as stupid as he seems.'*

***\*Harry, nobody could be as stupid as he seems.\****

Standing straight Harry ignored the shivering cold of the Dementors that was permeating the air around him and gave a short, mocking bow to his opponents. Voldemort's scarlet eyes narrowed and his thin lips curled as he motioned his Death Eaters forward.

"Bring him to me," he hissed, a skeletal finger aimed at Harry.

The two Death Eaters Harry did not recognise immediately charged towards him, apparently intent on dragging him to their master by their own hands. Harry remained in his place, rising up onto the balls of his feet as they bore down on him. Just as the first one reached him he seemed to explode into action.

Harry's right leg snapped out as his hips pivoted, connecting a simple yet effective side kick into his attacker's stomach. The Death Eater folded in half, clutching at his middle as Harry stepped close and smashed his left knee into the man's face.

As the now insensate Death Eater collapsed to the ground, Harry pivoted and simultaneously leapt three feet into the air. As he spun about his leg shot out and nearly separated the second Death Eater's head from his shoulders. Harry landed lightly and watched with a smirk as the man toppled over like a felled tree, just as unconscious as his companion.

***\*Wizards these days have no appreciation for personal combat.\****

***\*They've become lazy. Complacent. Prefer to use their wands instead of their hands.\****

*'Just makes my job easier. Oh, this should be fun. I know this one.'*

The tall Death Eater was marching up to Harry with long strides, his hood thrown back and mask discarded to reveal his moustached face. In his hand, instead of a wand, he was holding a large and gleaming axe of which he was eagerly fingering the keen edge.

"Macnair," growled Harry, remembering not only his past encounter with the man during Voldemort's rebirth the previous year, but also how the brute had been assigned to execute Buckbeak, Hagrid's hippogriff.

The burly man bared his teeth and took his axe in both hands, clearly ready and willing to fight. Harry reached within the folds of his scarlet Quidditch robes and drew clear the gleaming blade of Godric Gryffindor's sword. With practiced grace he weaved the broadsword in the air between them and

settled into a ready posture.

"That puny table knife will not be able to help you, Potter!" snarled Macnair.

"Come and get me then," taunted Harry, shifting fluidly into another stance and then another.

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With a bestial roar Macnair charged forward, swinging his axe high over his head and down. Harry arced his sword up and across, deflecting the axe as he pivoted on a heel. As he spun around and Macnair's momentum carried him past, Harry switched hands and smacked the Death Eater on the rump with the flat edge of the blade.

***\*Clumsy oaf, isn't he?\****

***\*Relies too much on his size and strength.\****

*'He never did strike me as being overly smart.'*

Macnair snarled in frustration and whirled around to face Harry again. His strokes were shorter this time round and more controlled, but still he could not penetrate Harry's defence. The blades clashed together, ringing out loudly as Harry parried again and again. With a deft flick he twisted the axe to one side and slashed across Macnair's chest.

"Grrraah!"

The Death Eater stumbled back, hissing in pain from the deep cut. Steadying himself Macnair glared at Harry, his eyes burning with rage. With his teeth bared in animalistic fury he ran forward again, swinging his axe wildly.

Harry blocked and deflected several blows before deciding that Macnair was doing nothing more than wasting his time. He was down here to fight Voldemort, not deal with his lackeys. For a moment he seemed to lower his sword, creating an opening for Macnair to strike at. As the Death Eater swung his axe, Harry neatly stepped to the side and lashed out.

"EEEEEEAARRRGH!!!"

"Not to worry," Harry said as he returned Gryffindor's sword to its sheath, "I'm certain your master will give you a new hand. He's done it before."

Macnair dropped to his knees, mewling in pain, and Harry stepped away from him to face the last of the Death Eaters Voldemort had sent his way. Anyone watching would have felt their blood go cold as green eyes locked with grey eyes.

The pure, unadulterated hatred that began to seep from Harry at the sight of his foe was an almost palpable force. Even if he had not thrown back his cowl, even if he had still been wearing his Death Eater mask, even if the Situation Map had not already revealed his identity, Harry would have recognised him.

***\*What do you know; it's the arsehole's father.\****

*'They do look alike, don't they? Unfortunately their attitudes are the same as well.'*

"You're working for a madman, you know," he said in a conversational tone.

Lucius Malfoy sneered back at him, "He pays well."

Harry smirked and retorted, "I thought the Malfoys did not want for money. Is your greed that blinding?"

"My Lord deals in the currency of power, boy."

"Then let's see how well he pays you," challenged Harry, drawing his wand.

Malfoy's sneer intensified as he drew his own wand from within his black robes and immediately fired a curse his way. "Binduscorpus!" he shouted, causing magical ropes to explode out from the tip of his wand and straight at Harry.

Harry leapt high into the air, easily passing over the ropes, and replied, "Diffindo!"

The spell cut through the ropes without resistance, severing them from Malfoy's control. Harry had used a bit of wandless magic to aid his jump, propelling him between than five yards straight up, giving him ample time to actively retaliate before landing.

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"Pyros!" he snapped, causing five foot high flickering red flames to erupt around Malfoy, completely encircling him within.

"Diminos!" countered Malfoy as the flaming circle began to slowly contract. The flames writhed as his spell reacted against them, diminishing their strength until they were reduced to only a couple of feet in height. With a triumphant grin Malfoy jumping clear and aimed another curse at Harry,

"Expelliarmus!"

Apparently he was under the impression that Harry would be rendered more-or-less helpless against him without a wand. Thus he was slightly surprised when his Disarming Spell hit Harry's chest with about the same effect as a raindrop. Only a raindrop would have made him a little wet.

***\*I think maybe it's time to wrap this up, Harry.\****

***\*Yes, we're just wasting time and energy with him.\****

Harry levelled his wand at the Malfoy patriarch and smiled, "Razor Bindus!"

Malfoy barely had a chance to move before he was entangled in a cocoon of razor wire, the fine steel cords wrapped tightly around him from ankles to chest. Gasping in pain as the razors bit into him, Malfoy teetered unsteadily before falling over in a heap.

"From the look of things," observed Harry as he stepped past the collapsed Death Eater, making his way towards where Voldemort was standing and waiting, "I'd say he's not paying you enough."

\*\*\*

Ron had to admit, this Situation Map of Harry's was a brilliant idea. But at the same time, it was incredibly frustrating and when next he saw his friend he had a dozen suggestions to make. It was amazingly easy to keep track of people and their movements with the map, but he had no clear idea of

what was really happening above.

Ron was assuming, that when the attack had begun, that the various Patroni had attacked the Dementors and inflicted casualties. Unfortunately all Ron had seen were the Dementors shifting about in confusion and sometimes the dot would blink out and disappear. He would have to talk to Harry and see if a Patronus could be displayed by the map as well.

"McGinnis, I can see three Dementors breaking off towards your section of the wall."

"I see them."

"Tighten it up, Sheila..."

Then there were the bracelet portkeys everyone outside was wearing. A stroke of genius using these to allow them all to hear what everyone else was saying. Unfortunately, they could hear everything said all at the same time. Having over a hundred people talking simultaneously and sounding as if they were standing right next to you, was getting more than a little confusing.

"Carmen, Zabini, there's a pair of acromantula trying to climb the wall about fifteen yards to your left," he swallow nervously. He shuddered at the thought of one of those things getting inside the castle, "I don't know if spiders that big can climb a vertical wall, but I don't want to find out."

"Unfortunately they can, Weasley," replied Zabini in a curt voice, "They're already almost halfway up. Any ideas, Ryder?"

"Banishing Charm," suggested Carmen.

"This is Anderson, I need some help here."

And to top everything off, Ron had absolutely no idea how Harry had gotten from the top of the Astronomy Tower to the battlefield below it. He hadn't seen it happen, he had been busy assessing the effect their first attack had had on the Dementors, but he had a suspicion that Snape was behind it.

After all, the Potions Master was the only other person up there.

'Should I send someone to check?'

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Dumbledore, who was standing with his feet on the lake section of the map, spoke up, "Ronald, I believe that Harry might need some assistance shortly."

Ron turned to where Harry was advancing on the dot labelled Tom Riddle, noting as he did the half dozen or so Dementors that were heading towards him.

"Professor McGonagall, there's a bunch of Dementors trying to get to Harry. Can you keep them off his back? I think he's trying to have that chat with You-Know-Who he was talking about."

"We shall do our best, Mr Weasley."

"Don't worry, Ron," assured Hermione, who was not far from the professor, "We'll keep him safe."

He was anxiously waiting to see what would happen when Dumbledore rested a hand on his arm and turned him away. "I know he is your friend, but you cannot allow this to distract you. Harry is more than capable of taking care of himself. You must remain focused on directing those he has placed in your hands."

'I know, but it's not easy.'

Something caught his eye, not far from the Quidditch pitch. "Professor Lupin? Can you and Snuffles hear me?"

"We're here, Ron. What is it?"

"According to the map Wormtail is right by Hagrid's hut. You should be able to see him from where you are."

There was a pause, then, "Nothing. He must be in his Animagus form. There's no way we could spot a rat from this distance."

'Something else for Harry to add when he gets back.'

\*\*\*

**\*You are completely and unashamedly out of your mind.\***

'What makes you say that?'

**\*Um, let me think... it might have something to do with the fact that you are insane!\***

**\*Harry, you're wilfully walking into a fight with Voldemort.\***

'So?'

**\*You might have the power of the Order at your disposal, but Voldemort is just on the short side of true immortality.\***

'And your point is?'

**\*What happens when an irresistible force bangs heads with an immovable object?\***

'Nothing good I'll bet.'

**\*Exactly. This is going to get dirty, Harry.\***

**\*Very dirty.\***

'Just the way I like it. Now hush for a minute.'

Harry drew to a halt at the foot of the small hillock Voldemort was standing upon, not more than thirty feet away. The two wizards stood frozen in place, like statues cast in bronze, their eyes locked in a silent battle. Fiery green met and challenged pulsing red.

A minute passed, two, three and yet neither one moved, save for an occasional stirring of their robes by the wind. The long minutes stretched between them, undisturbed and separated from the battle raging not far away. It was Harry that finally broke the deadlock and spoke up.

"Glad you stopped by, Tom," he said, "I've been wanting to talk with you."

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"You like to flirt with death, Potter," replied Voldemort, his crimson eyes narrowing to fine slits at Harry's use of his given name. "It's time you learnt that death is looking for a more permanent

relationship."

A frigid chill swept over Harry, but not from anything the dark lord had said or done. Harry glanced to the side and spotted a trio of Dementors bearing down on him, their hoods already thrown back to expose their eyeless faces.

His wand was levelled at them and the incantation uttered before Harry even had time to think about it. His three golden Patroni leapt out from the tip of his wand, tearing at the approaching Dementors with unholy glee. As first one, then the second and lastly the third Dementor exploded in black and blue fire, Harry felt the coldness begin to ebb and gradually faded away.

"An impressive show, Potter," sneered Voldemort, "But doubtless a draining effort for such a young and inexperienced boy such as yourself.

***\*Inexperienced? We are thoroughly insulted. Kick his scaly ass.\****

***\*Better yet, toast his scaly ass and then kick it.\****

"I think you will be unpleasantly surprised by how little effort that took," replied Harry through clenched teeth. His long repressed anger was starting to rise to the surface, causing the air about them was to swirl around with agitation.

Voldemort snorted disdainfully turned to one side, looking away from Harry to contemplate his minions as they lay siege to the castle walls. "I could kill you so very easily if I wished to."

Harry arched his eyebrows and retorted with all the sarcasm he could muster, "What? And not utterly humiliate or torture me first? Oh, that's not your style at all, Tom!"

"Stop calling me that!" he snarled, whirling back to face Harry, his thin lips drawn back and baring his small and sharp looking teeth.

***\*Oooh, you hit a nerve...\****

*'Of course I did. This battle is just as much about words as it is about magic.'*

***\*Don't get cocky though, making him angry will also make him stronger.\****

*'It will also make him careless.'*

"I'll call you whatever the hell I like," declared Harry, using his wand to point at Voldemort. "You perpetuate people's fear of you by assuming a false name and title. Then, to further their fear even more, you cause them not to speak it. 'You-Know-Who'. You claim to be so great, the most powerful sorcerer in the world, and yet almost nobody who you really are!"

"They fear me for good reason, boy," Voldemort ground out.

Harry sneered and rolled his eyes, "They fear you, oh might dark lord, because they don't know who you are anymore. Unfortunately people tend to be afraid of what they don't know, or don't understand."

***\*Sad, but true more often than not.\****

Voldemort drew his wand from the folds of his thick robes, clenching his hand tightly around the wooden shaft. "I begin to tire of your babbling, Potter. I did not come here today to listen to a mere boy make a mockery of me."

"Oh really?" Harry crossed his arms over his chest expectantly, "So what did you come here for?"

***\*The witty repartee?\****

***\*No, you dolt! He already said he wasn't here for that.\****

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"I came here," Voldemort explained. His voice grew louder with each word, "so that all the pitiful fools who thought me gone shall discover that my reign of darkness and terror have not yet even begun!"

Harry dropped his hands to his sides and shook his head, "Terror?"

Voldemort glared at Harry and lowered his brow menacingly, "You too would do well to fear me, Potter. You have caused me a great many inconveniences over the years. For all those slights I shall ensure that your death will not be painless one."

***\*Fear is his most powerful tool. Do not let it control you.\****

"I'm not afraid of you, Tom Riddle," replied Harry, standing proud, "Never again."

"Very well then," Voldemort assumed a classic duelling stance, holding his wand up before him. "Let us match the powers of Lord Voldemort, heir of Salazar Slytherin, against the famous Harry Potter." Harry held his wand lightly in his hand and assumed a similar position, "You said the exact same thing to me three years ago, inside the Chamber of Secrets." He bowed fractionally at Voldemort, but never let his eyes stray from his opponent, "I defeated your memory then, I shall do the same now."

Voldemort roared in fury and jabbed his wand towards Harry, "CRUCIO!"

Harry dropped sideways, the curse missing him by several feet as he rolled clear. He came up in a low crouch, his wand at the ready, "Naturam Expellas!!"

Thick green vines erupted from the ground beneath Voldemort, rising up and wrapping around him. Their thick coils had tightly bound his feet and legs before he could react to their presence as they continued to ensnare him, "Reducto!"

The vines were torn apart and Voldemort was free, "Serpensortia!"

A dozen large snakes, Harry recognised them as King Cobras, sprang forth and immediately began to wind their way towards Harry. He toyed with the idea of using his fluency in Parseltongue to control them, but as Voldemort could also speak the language that would likely end with the snakes continually being sent back and forth between them.

"Transit Aurum!" he cried as the cobras drew near and the snakes froze in place, gleaming the dull yellow of unpolished gold. He looked up and sent back a cute little curse that made the earth

Voldemort was standing on turn liquid, like quicksand. The dark lord immediately dropped, sinking almost to his hips, before casting a quick levitation spell that lifted him up and back onto solid ground

nearby.

At this point, looking at him, Harry knew that Voldemort was beginning to realize that Harry was no longer the easy target he had been in previous encounters. The dark lord scowled at him and decided to end the battle quickly, rather than pointlessly draw it out.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Harry, without even blinking, did something so completely and utterly stupid, that not even the usually loquacious members of the Order could think of anything to say. He defiantly stood his ground and let the Killing Curse strike him on the chest.

And as the world disappeared in a swirl of darkness, Harry heard Voldemort's high cackle as he loudly proclaimed his victory.

"Behold! Harry Potter! The Boy Who Lived - **NO MORE!!**"

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## 20. Know Yourself

Ginny was giving very serious thought to killing Severus Snape.

On average she, along with the rest of the Gryffindors, considered Snape's untimely demise at least once every Potions class. Right now, however, Ginny was not in Potions and she was not contemplating the action in the jestful manner she usually did.

This time she was deadly earnest.

He had killed Harry.

And now she was going to kill him.

All that was preventing her from separating every part of Snape from every other part, was that she could not decide whether or not to make him suffer first.

When she had seen Snape push Harry over the edge of the Astronomy Tower, Ginny's world had come to a crashing halt. For those long seconds in which Harry had plummeted to the earth, she had stopped breathing and her heart had ceased to beat. Only after Harry had landed safely, not in the least bit perturbed by his fall, had she regained control of her petrified body.

*'I should never have left him alone up here.'*

Immediately after that, when Harry strode forward to take on Voldemort's Death Eaters, she had rushed off. Professor Flitwick's calls had not stopped, or even slowed her down, as Ginny raced along the ramparts and into the tower. She had not even been aware of her legs moving, but had flown up the stairway, taking the steps three at a time.

"Weasley? What are you doing here? You're supposed to be down on the ramparts!"

Snape had sneered and immediately begun berating her when she burst out onto the landing, her wand clasped so tightly in her hand that her arm began to tremble from the effort.

"I saw," she had ground out, feeling a blinding rage begin to settle over her.

The greasy haired traitor had opened his mouth to speak, doubtless to protest and claim his innocence, but Ginny knew better. She had clearly seen him standing close behind Harry and then shove him firmly between the shoulders, catapulting him into open space.

"Bastard!" she snapped, before he could deny his guilt, "Expelliarmus!"

She had been so furious, so emotionally charged, that her simple Disarming Charm had blown Snape off his feet and into the air. He flew back and smashed hard into the stone wall behind him, a crack of breaking bones sounding as he impacted.

Ginny was intent only on Snape and completely ignored his wand as it sailed towards her, clattering to the floor at her feet. She waited for him to struggle to his feet, cursing under his breath and fixing her with a murderous glare that she matched with one of her own.

"Stupefy!" she shouted, once again allowing her emotions to charge her magic beyond what it was normally capable of. Or perhaps she was tapping into the power of the Order. She did not know, nor did she care. In either case, Ginny watched with great satisfaction as Snape collapsed in a heap as if pole axed.

After staring at his crumpled form for several moments Ginny had finally regained her senses and turned to look over the battlements and see how Harry was fairing. Gazing downward she watched as Harry fought a short, but intense, duel with a Death Eater she recognised as Lucius Malfoy.

Then he faced off against Voldemort.

*'I should have jumped down after him and helped.'*

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After conversing for a minute, the quiet chat he had spoken of, the two had begun to duel. It had not taken long for Ginny to realize that Harry was by far the superior of the pair, handling everything Voldemort sent his way with casual ease.

*'Why? Why didn't he move out of the way?'*

Harry had seen the curse coming, she knew he had, yet he had stood his ground and just... just let it hit him. The green flash had washed over him, like a second aura to replace his normal blazing white, gold and scarlet. And then, as if in some kind of terrible slow motion, he had dropped to the ground.

"Behold! Harry Potter! The Boy Who Lived - **NO MORE!!**"

Voldemort's high pitched cackle had rung loud and true across the besieged battlements of Hogwarts, bringing all activity to a halt. Even the trolls, who were too slow-witted to really understand, and the spiders, who had no stake in the matter, ceased their assaults at his cry.

Ginny felt her body grow cold, an icy despair suddenly embracing her whole being.

*'No. No, he can't be. Please God, no!'*

With a death's head grin on his face Voldemort contemptuously kicked at Harry's body, rolling him

over onto his back. From her high vantage point Ginny could just make out Harry's wand as it fell from his grasp and rolled across the ground. Blood was trickling from his nose and mouth, staining his features in red as Voldemort threw back his head and laughed.

Tears began to well up in Ginny's eyes as her breath hitched in her throat and she struggled to draw in any air. All she could do was stand there, eyes fixed firmly upon Harry, who Voldemort was gloating over.

A minute passed, two, then three. Voldemort had ceased his attentions to Harry and had moved off to where Lucius Malfoy was lying prone. As she watched him walking away, the terrible cold that suffused every part of her disappeared, replaced by something worse. Something primal in its nature, a need that burned within her like a newborn sun.

*'He killed Harry.'*

Ginny blinked away her tears, turning from the sight of Voldemort standing victorious and glared down at the still unconscious Snape. She brushed the back of her free hand against her eyes, forcing down the flood she knew was coming. She would cry later, but for now she had something else to do.

*'I will not cry.'*

She raised her wand and pointed it at Snape.

*'I will get even.'*

The treacherous bastard would be first. He had betrayed Dumbledore, Harry and everyone else, delivering Harry into Voldemort's reach. And from there into death. For that Ginny would make him pay with his life as retribution.

*'And after him; Voldemort.'*

It did not matter that she would probably die in the attempt, but Ginny vowed that the dark lord would rue having met her. There was nothing she would not do to hurt him, kill him if possible. Even if it meant resorting to using the Unforgivable Curses, she did not care for it no longer mattered to her.

With Harry gone there only one thing left in her mind; revenge.

Her focus was so intently fixed upon Snape, the raw power of every erg of magic she could lay claim to building around her, that Ginny almost missed it. A single sentence, spoken in a loud and clear voice, but rasping like Muggle sandpaper.

A voice she could not fail to recognise.

A voice that stopped her dead in her tracks.

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"I'm not finished with you!"

\*\*\*

Black.

Everything was black.

Complete, bottomless, glorious black. It went on forever and ever without any end. It was comfortable and encompassing, keeping him safe from anything and everything. It felt wonderful.

Naturally he was not happy when something intruded upon his sanctuary.

At first it seemed to shimmer and flicker about at the edge of his vision, which was odd since he was pretty sure he wasn't using his eyes. Slowly it began to creep more and more into his world, a warm, soothing pink that spread about him.

With a jerk and several breathless coughs, he found his eyes blinking open as the outside world returned to him in lucid sensation.

Offhand, things were not looking good for Harry. He felt as if he had been kicked in the guts by a unicorn, his lungs were burning with every breath that he was struggling to take in, the sharp metallic tang of blood filled his mouth and his scar was bringing new definition to the concept of headache.

Harry's muscles complained loudly as he forced himself to roll onto his side, coughing up the blood that was pooled in his mouth. Grey fog was intruding on the edges of his vision, which was blurred as it had done when he had still relied on his glasses. Spots of red, pink, orange and several other colours seemed to hover in front of him.

*'I'm think I'm going to hurl.'*

He looked up and saw Voldemort standing over the fallen Lucius Malfoy, apparently finding his Death Eater's predicament amusing.

***\*You used up too much power at once stopping that curse. It's drained you badly.\****

Harry grimaced and fought down the rising nausea as he pushed himself up onto his hands and knees,

*'I thought you said none of you had ever exhausted the Order's reserves before.'*

***\*Yes, well, none of us were dumb enough to jump in front of a Killing Curse before.\****

***\*Ze power drain eez almost crippling,\* explained Joan, \*You cannot dissipate anozer wun of zose.\****

With his teeth clenched so tight his jaw muscles were threatening to cramp, Harry forced his protesting arms and legs to right his body. Choking down a scream of pain he rose to his feet, swaying unsteadily over where he had fallen.

***\*If you want to pull this off, you're going to have to play it carefully.\****

***\*Especially after all the effort you've already expended.\****

Summoning his wand to his hand, Harry took some comfort in the familiar feel of wood against his palm. With every fibre of his being screaming at him to flee into the safety of Hogwarts, Harry wiped at the blood that was dribbling thickly from his mouth and nose. Taking deep and steady breaths, he drew himself straight, standing tall and proud.

"Tom," he called hoarsely, "I'm not finished with you!"

Voldemort froze, as if turned to stone, upon hearing Harry's voice. Slowly, as if unwilling to see the confirmation, he turned around to where Harry was standing. His thin and pale face was a picture of

abject shock.

"Impossible!"

"It is impossible," agreed Harry, nodding his head. After a moment he shrugged and said, "I did it anyway."

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With slow and deliberate steps he began to advance on Voldemort, aware that his almost prowling manner was generating a satisfying intimidating effect. The truth of the matter was that he was so unsure of his footing that he had to go slowly. Just getting one foot in front of the other without stumbling was an effort.

"Yes, my blood made you stronger than if you'd used anyone else's," he rasped as he drew nearer to Voldemort with each stride, "Yes, the protection my Mum left in me - you have it too. And, yes, you can touch me."

When he was only ten yards away, Harry raised his wand to chest height and bared his bloody lips in a snarl. Voldemort looked totally dumbstruck and seemed unable to move, his mouth hanging open and his narrow eyes wide with surprise. Every muscle in Harry's body tensed to rocklike rigidity as he focused upon his wand.

Voldemort did not even have time to blink, let alone think, as he was blown away by a powerful Banishing Charm. He crashed to the ground with a loud crunch a hundred feet back from where he had been standing, a cloud of dust rising around him.

Harry lowered his wand with a satisfied grin and shouted out a challenge.

"But I can still kick your arse!"

\*\*\*

*'He's alive!'*

Hermione watched in amazement, not to mention blessed relief, as Harry's corpse twitched where it lay, rolled over onto its side and then stood up on slightly unsteady legs. When Harry, apparently very much alive and well, blew Voldemort through the air and halfway across the front lawn, she did not know whether to laugh or resume crying.

*'Thank the heavens, he's alive. I'm going to kill him for scaring me like that.'*

Voldemort rolled into a sitting position, his black robes lying dishevelled about him. With a look of indignant fury he grabbed his wand and raised it high above his head.

"Terra irae canem!" he shouted, causing a dozen mounds of earth to rise around him. The ground heaved up and broke open as the allies he had summoned dug themselves free.

They were dogs of some kind, massive beasts that stood five feet at the shoulder and carried themselves like the predators they were. Their bodies rippled with muscles layered upon muscles layered upon sinew and bone, covering in thick, coarse fur that was a black as night. Their eyes glowed the same blood red as Voldemort's.

The Fury Hounds, which Hermione recognised them as being, let loose low howls as they pulled away from the holes they risen from. They bared their gleaming fangs and, at a gesture from Voldemort, charged at Harry, baying like wolves as they ran. The Hounds moved almost too fast for the eye to follow and were quickly bearing down on Harry.

Harry swept his wand up, glowing yellow, then down and across in a wide arc. A wall of blazing yellow and orange fire exploded forth from its tip, streaking across the ground with frightening speed and catching the bulk of the charging Fury Hounds within its length. The flames rolled over the dogs with such intensity that Hermione could see them being burnt down to their bones in a matter of seconds.

*'Good Lord,'* she thought as the firewall died down, *'He's mad as Hell and twice as hot!'*

Only three of the Fury Hounds survived the fiery onslaught, one so badly burned that it was not much more than a slow burning skeleton. The other two had only caught the trailing edges of the fire and made it through with their fur coats smoking.

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The smaller of the two charged straight at Harry, pouncing at him with claws outspread and fangs gleaming in its wide open jaws. Harry jerked his wand up as the Hound came at him, brilliant streams of blue-white lightning striking the beast in the chest with a clap of thunder. The Hound was knocked back and fell writhing to the ground, arcs of electricity crackling around it.

Harry drew his sword as the last Hound, the third and badly burnt animal had collapsed, and met it head on as it sprang at him. It was too close for him to use the weapon effectively and all he could manage was to jab the blade between him and its slaving jaws as they crashed to the ground after colliding in midair.

Hermione heard Cho beside her gasp and clutch at her chest with one hand. But Harry was quick to deal with the Fury Hound, jamming his knees under its body and pushing it off him with a mighty heave. The Hound twisted in the air and landed on its feet like a cat and immediately sprang at Harry a second time.

But Harry was prepared, already on his feet and broadsword poised to strike. The gleaming three foot blade flashed back and forth, slicing across the Fury Hound's chest as Harry stepped to the side at the last second. The Hound sailed past him and landed, whirling about to face Harry and preparing to leap at him a third time.

As it turned to face him its hind legs collapsed and it fell to the ground with a lurch, its underside neatly sliced in a lacerated X shape. Steaming entrails began to seep from the cuts in its belly as the Hound's lifeblood soaked into the earth from the fatal wound. With a flourish Harry decapitated the

suffering creature and somehow managed to sheath the sword in the same graceful movement.

"Avada Kedavra!"

*'Oh no! Not again!'*

Voldemort had regained his footing and now launched another Killing Curse at Harry, clearly intent on succeeding where he had failed only minutes earlier. This time, however, Harry did not stand his ground and try weather the attack. Instead he dived into a forward roll, straight towards Voldemort, and came up in leap that covered a dozen yards, landing at the dark lord's feet.

With startling speed Harry planted a roundhouse kick to Voldemort's face with his right foot, reversing the same motion to swing a hook kick to his opponent's temple. The cracks from the impacts sounded loudly in the still air, like gunshots.

Voldemort cried out in pain and anger, staggering back as Harry pressed in close with powerful punches to the ribs. Roaring like an injured beast Voldemort raised his hands high and shouted something Hermione could not make out. The air between him and Harry shimmered, twisted around itself, and then Harry was blown back, high into the air as if launched from a catapult.

*'Sweet Merlin, he's airborne.'*

As with his fall from the Astronomy Tower, Harry flipped and spun through a triple somersault, landing hard in a low crouch. His head snapped towards Voldemort and he raised his arms high above him, hands clenched into tight fists. Green and brown wisps of energy writhed and spun between his fists, which glowed with jade light.

Harry slammed his hands down, a wave of displacement breaking around him. The ground before him rippled and shifted, cracking and shattering and heaving as it streaked directly towards Voldemort.

With the roar of mountains falling, Voldemort was engulfed as the earth he stood upon erupted around him. Great stone monoliths broke through the ground and surged up into the dark skies, toppling and crumbling against each other.

"Holy shit!"

Hermione turned from the scene of carnage and magic gone wild to stare in disbelief, along with Cho and Professor McGonagall, at a wide-eyed Neville. Against the rumbling thunder of shifting earth and rock, Neville noticed their attentions and blushed a furious scarlet.

"Sorry, Professor," he apologised, ducking his head.

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"It's quite alright, Mr Longbottom," replied McGonagall, returning her gaze to the battle raging below them, "I was looking for the right words myself."

\*\*\*

With a burst of green light the massive rocks and mounds of dirt that covered Voldemort blew apart into billowing clouds of dust. The storm of debris buffeted over Harry as he stood his ground and waited for the air to clear. His robes whipped around him and he could feel small shards of rock cutting into his exposed face and hands.

After the bulk of the dust clouds had passed him Harry looked up and saw Voldemort standing in a shallow crater, surrounded by ploughed earth.

*\*I think you pissed him off,\** observed Quetz, sounding slightly worried.

*\*Miniature earthquakes do that to a fellow.\**

Voldemort raised his arms up, the air around him swirling with dust, and Harry could see the power radiating from and around him. He had observed the dark lord's pitch black aura from afar before the battle had been joined. It already been a terrible and disturbing sight then, but now it had grown to monstrous proportions, extending far beyond Voldemort's body as he exerted himself.

"Pyronimbus!"

The air between Harry and Voldemort began to sparkling, reminding Harry of the faeries that graced the Great Hall during Christmas. But somehow, looking at the magic being used, he doubted that this was going to be as benign. Only moments later he was proved correct as one of the many glowing sparks shot at him.

Harry jerked to one side at the streak of light slashed against his robed arm which felt the extreme heat. His robe caught alight where it had been hit and Harry hurried to extinguish the flame before it spread. More of the sparks were diving towards him, a veritable rain of fire that he would not be able to evade.

*\*Yep, I'd say he is no longer in a good mood.\**

*\*Put up a barrier! Now!\**

"Defensor Lux!" Harry shouted, tracing his wand in a complex pattern. An impenetrable bubble of light sprang to being around him, absorbing the sparks and fire that showered down. The shield screeched like metal being torn apart and the glare was almost blinding.

The rain of fire continued to fall and rebound off the shield, igniting the grass surrounding where Harry stood. The strain of maintaining this defence in his already weakened state quickly began to wear on him, forcing him to retaliate in the hope that Voldemort would have to cease his own attack to deal with Harry's challenge.

"Wingardium Naturam Furor!"

All around Harry the air seemed to darken and began to swirl about. With every passing second the wind picked up speed and fury until it was howling fit to rival the Fury Hounds Harry had dispatched earlier. Such was the force of the wind that even the fire rain was being deflected by its relentless presence.

Harry grinned in relief and satisfaction. The miniature tornado he had created was pretty big in its own

right, easily seventy feet across. From his spot in its eye Harry could see the edges of the vortex tugging at Voldemort's robes. By anyone's standards it was an impressive feat of magic that perhaps only the dark lord and Dumbledore could ever match.

The pride Harry felt welling inside of him as Voldemort struggled to maintain his footing came from his knowledge that he had brought this force of nature into being. Harry, without any form of outside aid; he was not even drawing on the Order.

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The drain of dissipating the Killing Curse had been substantial, which meant that Harry could not use the Order's power for his defence and the little surprise he had planned for Voldemort - there just wasn't enough left to do both. Good thing he was a powerful wizard in his own right.

*'Just hope I can keep it going long enough.'*

***\*You'd better.\****

With Voldemort suitably distracted for the moment Harry began drawing in the Order's power, focusing it within him for when he needed it. He was calling on everything he had, leaving nothing at all as a reserve, concentrating instead on summoning forth every iota of magic he could lay his hands on.

***\*Let this be a lesson to you. Next time you fight a mortal enemy; NO GRANDSTANDING!\****

*'Don't shout like that. My head's hurting badly enough.'*

***\*Uh oh. He's doing something...\****

Voldemort had retreated back several paces, away from the worst of the tornado's reach, and had began an incantation. With the roaring wind surrounding him, Harry stood no chance of hearing what was being said and his vision was still too unreliable for him to try and lip-read at this distance. Still, once the spell was done, Harry was left in no doubt about just what it was. Balls of acid green fire, each the size of a Quaffle, erupted from Voldemort's wand. They shot towards Harry in a staccato rhythm, relentlessly forcing their way through the bludgeoning wind.

***\*We're dealing with fire. Douse it.\****

*'With what? There's too many of them for me to stop them all before they hit me.'*

***\*The lake.\****

Harry forgot completely about the tornado, allowing it to die away with a whisper, and giving the fireballs a clear path. For an instant they seemed to hover in place before hurtling towards him. "Accio water!" Harry shouted at the top of his lungs, his wand aimed at the nearby lake, which responded to his call in a manner that would give everyone that saw it something to talk about for years to come.

For a moment Harry ridiculously wondered if perhaps he had gone too far and actually drained the entire lake. The moment after that he decided that, considering the situation, he really did not care. With a wolfish grin he watched as a mountain of water rose up from the lake, like the tsunamis he had once read about.

With a crash like rolling thunder the mass of water broke before Harry, immediately rising up in a defensive wall. The fireballs were smothered with casual ease as they splashed into the depths of this fifty foot high water wall.

***\*Nicely done. You've bought more time.\****

"Crucio!"

Pain beyond imagination washed over Harry with the force of a speeding train. The air in his lungs exploded out of him in a breathless gasp as he lost his hold on the water before him. As Harry dropped to the ground, the wall of water collapsed with him, soaking everything in the immediate area. Harry had made another mistake, perhaps a fatal one this time. He had been concentrating so fully on Voldemort that he had completely forgotten the four Death Eaters that he had dispatched earlier. Obvious one of them had recovered enough and now sought to aid their lord.

The pain was too much, far too much. He had suffered under the Cruciatus Curse before, at the hands of Voldemort, who was undoubtedly more powerful than whomever was cursing him now. But there was something wrong, something that was amplifying the curse beyond what it was normally capable of.

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He was laying immobile on the ground. The pain was so great that Harry could not even manage a scream around it. He could feel its jagged edges ravaging his mind. His nerve endings burnt with cold fire that overrode his mind's frantic attempts to move. So much pain that he was practically paralysed by its raw intensity. He couldn't take much more. Oh gods, it hurt. It hurt beyond what he understood. The curse.

Sever.

Break.

Link.

***\*Use the link!!\****

It was something only Harry would ever be able to do. Any other wizard would have been helpless against the waves of unbridled pain. But Harry had been chosen by the Order of the Phoenix and given access to a power beyond imagination. He was hardly an ordinary wizard and, even without the Order, was in a class of his own.

Even so it was a sheer miracle that he survived.

His mind was completely cut off, too busy struggling against the pain that seemed to increase with each passing eternity. Of course it had probably only been a matter of seconds since the curse hit him, but certainly felt like forever. Since Harry's mind was otherwise engaged, it settled upon pure instinct

to save him.

Completely separate and acting without any interaction with his brain, Harry somehow managed to find the link connecting him to the Death Eater's wand. He found the link, traced it back along the magical path it wound and then gave a twist in just the right place.

"GGGGGAAAAHHH!!!"

Harry arched his back and gasped in a deep breath, filling his lungs with sweet oxygen. His limbs trembled uncontrollably and he was still feeling ghostly echoes of the pain, but he was free and once again able to think. Blood was streaming from his nose, ears and mouth, soaking his robes and shirt underneath as he turned to look behind him.

The Death Eater, the one he had kned in the face, was now writhing on the ground in insurmountable agony, a victim of his own curse. Harry had accessed the magic of the Cruciatus Curse being used on him and done some magically tinkering. In effect he had created what Muggles would call a feedback loop, sending the curse right back to where it had come from.

***\*You okay there, Harry?\****

*'Never better,'* he replied, wiping his mouth with the back of a sleeve.

"So, Potter, you've managed to overthrow the Cruciatus Curse as well. Impressive."

Harry turned, to look up at Voldemort, who was leering down at him. Disregarding the numbness suffusing his body, he forced himself into a sitting position, looking around to see that his wand was lying several yards away. Well out of reach.

Voldemort aimed his wand at Harry's chest, "Let us test to see if you can survive the Killing Curse yet another time."

"You sure you want to risk that?" asked Harry, spitting blood.

"Third time lucky," replied Voldemort with an evil smile.

Harry struggled for a moment and managed to push himself upright, Voldemort standing not a yard away. "I wouldn't bet on it," he said, exploding unexpectedly into action.

His arm shot out and knocked Voldemort's wand away from him. At the same time he twisted to the side and kicked with all his might. His boot connected with a crack and launched Voldemort back several paces. Harry reached out his hand and, with the aid of magic, summoned his wand to it.

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***"Excelsior Defensor Transit Lux!!"***

This was what he had been saving the last of the Order's power for. A spell unlike any that had ever come before. A spell that Harry had conceived of and painstakingly constructed, with the help of the Order, over the past few months.

For a moment it almost seemed as though the sun itself had come down and touched the earth where Harry was standing. Then a circular wave of brilliant white and gold energy exploded around Harry, making its way out. It was the most beautiful, yet terrifying thing anyone had ever seen. It poured out from Harry with unbelievable force, rolling outwards in all directions at once. And in its wake nothing remained.

The Dementors, the guards of Azkaban, were shredded by the wave's impact. Their black robes were torn to pieces, none larger than a Muggle postage stamp, and their hideous grey bodies exploded in black and indigo flames. Not even ashes remained of them and the tiny fragments of their robes disintegrated as they drifted in the air.

The various trolls, mountain, forest and cave varieties, froze where they stood. Their skin shot through with veins of grey and tan as they were swiftly transformed into stone statues. As the wave departed the stone immediate began to crack and crumble away, reducing the trolls to what amounted to piles of loose gravel.

Finally, after having travelled outwards for nearly half a mile, the rolling wave of magic and energy began to dissipate. With every dark creature in its path utterly destroyed its purpose had been fulfilled. Harry, now standing alone on the front lawn, looked around him in something of a daze. "Well, at least that's over with," he said into the silence.

***\*That's a relief.\****

***\*We're going to need a long holiday to recover from this.\****

***\*We? I think it's Harry that needs the holiday.\****

*'Can I pass out now?'*

\*\*\*

"Um, could somebody please tell me what's going on up there?"

Ron Weasley had never been so utterly frustrated, not to mention confused, by anything in his life. Something, something very big and most likely important, had just transpired and he did not have a clue what it was.

*'I am not using this map of Harry's again unless he makes some changes to it.'*

Reports of Harry's death had filtered into the PFT auditorium via the communications portkeys everyone was wearing. Complete silence had greeted the announcement and Ron had struggled to hold back his tears. Even Dumbledore had lost the usual twinkle in his eyes and suddenly slumped with the weight of the world on his aged shoulders.

Then, naturally, Harry had stood up and become The-Boy-Who-Live-Again.

From then on all Ron could make out, from the chatter he heard of those up on the battlements, Harry had begun to wage a full fledged war against You-Know-Who. From what he could hear it sounded like Harry had taken magical combat to an entirely new level. A much more powerful, not to mention dangerous one.

"I mean... that the heck just happened? Somebody? Anybody?"

Then something had happened that Ron could not explain. He had a theory that seemed to fit the facts, but he struggled to believe even Harry capable of that. Somehow Harry had done something and the next thing Ron knew, Tom Riddle's dot had vanished.

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Almost immediately after that the four Death Eaters had also disappeared and then something had swept over the masses of Dementors and trolls. It had been like watching an eraser sliding across the map, wiping away the dots of all those attacking the castle.

They just vanished.

"Harry survived a Killing Curse," answered what sounded like Fred or George's voice, "Beat the crap out of You-Know-Who. And then vaporised every last bad guy with a single spell."

Ron blinked.

Dumbledore blinked.

Everyone blinked.

"Deactivate Hogwarts Defences," announced Dumbledore after several seconds had passed in utter silence. There was a deep rumbling noise and Ron felt the sensation of going up as the auditorium began to rise. Looking down at the map and Harry's dot, which was swaying unsteadily back and forth as if he were somehow drunk, Ron decided he couldn't bear to wait.

"I'm not waiting," he said to Dumbledore and held up the hand with his portkey, "Deploy."

A moment later, after the usual twisting and pulling sensation, Ron found himself in the Great Hall, standing on the stage. He immediately set off at a fast run, heading through the Entrance Hall and out the front doors, which hung open. As he barrelled through and onto the battle scarred front lawn, he saw that many of those that had been fighting had come down from the ramparts.

Everyone was crowding around Harry, shouting and cheering and generally making nuisances of themselves. Several of the teachers that had come down, McGonagall, Flitwick and a few others, were trying to calm the celebrating students.

"Harry!" he shouted, jumping up and waving his arms.

Harry, with Hermione, Cho, Fred, George and several other students around him, lifted a tired arm and waved Ron over. Pushing through the masses Ron grinned broadly at his friend, but the smile quickly faded as he took in Harry's battered condition.

"Circe's liver, Harry!" he exclaimed, "What happened to you?"

"Voldemort and I had a nice, quiet chat," replied Harry, his voice rasping thickly. He turned his head and spat out some blood, swaying unsteadily on his feet. Fred and George immediately grabbed him by the waist and shoulders for support.

*'Dear Merlin, it's a miracle he's still standing.'*

"Harry!"

Everyone turned at the familiar voice and did a double take. Ginny was running up to them, her face split in a wide and relieved smile. Tears were streaming down her face and she was babbling nonsensically as she swept Harry up in tight hug. This was not what caused them all to react, since this was sort of what they expected from her.

It was Snape.

"What happened to him?" asked Fred, pointing.

Ginny pulled back from Harry slightly and looked back at Snape's unconscious body that was floating in the air several feet behind her. Ron didn't know whether to be concerned or amused at the Potions Master's predicament. "I saw what he did to you, Harry! I can testify if you want. I almost killed him when I got up there. I thought Voldemort had killed you!"

*'We all did.'*

Harry winced, "Ah... Gin? Take my advice and drop Potions before he wakes up."

"What? Why?" she asked quizzically.

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"Snape's a spy, remember?" said Harry, reaching up to massage his temples, "We needed a way to convince Voldemort of his loyalty."

And that's when the knut dropped. Ron, along with Hermione, Fred, George and especially Ginny gaped at Harry in total consternation.

"You had Snape push you off the Astronomy Tower just so that You-Know-Who would be convinced of his loyalty?!" bellowed Hermione in outraged disbelief.

"It was *his* idea," shrugged Harry.

Nobody could really think of anything to say to this, except that it would have probably been a good thing if Harry had warned them in advance. Especially considering the fact that Ginny had come within a hairsbreadth of killing Snape because of it.

"So..." Ron looked about the ravaged grounds, "Does this mean we won?"

"As soon as the urge to throw up my appendix stops I'll let you know," replied Harry, seeming to lean more heavily on the twins with each passing moment.

"What happened, Potter?" asked Professor McGonagall, who had come up behind Ginny and the still unconscious Snape, "What was that spell you used?"

Hermione asked an even more important question, "Where did all the Dementors and You-Know-Who go?"

Harry sighed and waved a hand vaguely, "The Dementors are destroyed. Completely gone. Poof. That wave was a variation on the Patronus Charm, but much more powerful. Turned the trolls into stone as well. As for Tom and his lackeys... the spell didn't hurt them. Instead it just teleported them away from

here."

It was incredible. Ron, nor anyone else for that matter, had ever heard anything like it. Harry was claiming that one single spell of his had managed to annihilate nearly two hundred Dementors in one fell swoop. That and it had also somehow gotten rid of You-Know-Who at the same time.

"Still got a few bugs to work out, though," Harry admitted sheepishly.

"Where did you send them to?" asked Professor Lupin, who had just arrived. Snuffle was at his feet and looking anxiously at Harry.

Harry shrugged and waved his hand vaguely again, smiling broadly and somewhat giddily "Aah... well, um, actually, that's one of the bugs. I'm still working on it. But I hear the weather's nice in Mexico this time of year!"

And, for the second time that day, Harry's world dissolved into black.

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## 21. Shades of Vallambrosa

The two men were sitting in comfortable looking chairs, which surprisingly enough actually felt comfortable as well, facing one and another across a small table. The younger of the two brushed some stray locks of his raven black hair away from his startling green eyes. He lounged lazily in his seat and considered the ancient man sitting opposite him.

He was truly ancient, older than time itself, but looked surprisingly fit and active despite this. He was clad in stately black robes and a hooded cloak with the cowl thrown back, exposing his long silver hair which framed his bottomless black eyes. Clutched in one claw-like hand was a large, golden hourglass, the sands of which were slowly trickling down.

\\We begin.//

With judicial poise the old man reached out with his free hand and motioned at the elegantly carved chess set sitting on the table between them.

\\Your move.//

"Oh, I'm afraid I am not that good at chess," said the young man, looking down at the chess board with a perplexed frown. He gnawed on his bottom lip and then asked, "I don't suppose you'd consider playing a game of exploding snap instead? Or maybe gobstones?"

\\...//

"That's what I thought."

\*\*\*

A pall of calm and quiet had descended over Hogwarts since the attack had ended. Perhaps the calmest and quietest place in the school was the Hospital Wing. It had been rather busy immediately after the attack, two weeks before, but had since become almost deserted, save for the single patient, who had yet to wake.

To say that everyone was worried about Harry would have been an understatement. The Gryffindors had been sneaking out of their dormitories during the nights to visit him and were more often than being caught in the act. Ginny, Ron and Hermione were the three primary culprits but took some comfort in the fact that every single Gryffindor besides themselves had been caught in the act at least once.

Ordinarily they would have used Harry's invisibility cloak, but a judicious search of his trunk had failed to turn up the item. This was highly unfortunate, especially when considering the detrimental effect it was having on house points. While Harry had been lying there unconscious for the past couple of weeks Gryffindor had slipped from first place to third. If he did not wake up soon they would end up coming stone last this year.

'Snape will be delighted,' thought Ginny morosely as she sat besides Harry's bed early that Sunday afternoon.

Ever since waking up from the sound thrashing Ginny had erroneously inflicted upon him, Snape had been positively vindictive towards her. In fact when he had first woken up his screams of outrage and calls for Ginny to be expelled had been heard in the Great Hall. Since then matters had only deteriorated to the point where Ginny had spoken to the headmaster about the possibility of doing as Harry had suggested and dropping Potions altogether.

'No such luck, unfortunately.'

Tiredly rubbing her eyes Ginny looked down at Harry, lying deathly still on the hospital bed, his breathing so shallow you had to watch closely to see it. His skin was a pale as it had ever been and contrasted starkly with the blackness of his hair.

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Everyone had been certain Madam Pomfrey would have Harry up on his feet in a day or two when they had first brought him to the infirmary. They're preconceptions were rudely shattered very early on as the nurse diagnosed his injuries. Apparently surviving the Killing Curse had taken more out of Harry than any of them realized or imagined.

Multiple lacerations, abrasions, torn muscles and ligaments, a few broken bones, fluid in both lungs, a ruptured spleen, haemorrhaging in the liver, frayed nervous tissue throughout the body and spinal column and possible neurological damage.

That was the short list.

It had taken Madam Pomfrey, along with a dozen mediwitches and wizards on loan from St. Mungos, seventeen hours before declaring Harry out of the woods. Her official report to Dumbledore, made in the presence of Remus and Sirius who passed it on to the children, was that Harry's heart had stopped and left him technically dead four times during her ministrations.

'Stop thinking about it!'

Ginny glanced away from Harry's still form, looking around the room and wondering for the hundredth time that afternoon how the twins had managed it. It was only a pity that Pomfrey would doubtless discover their "Get Well" gift before Harry woke up.

'If he ever does.'

"Ginny?"

She turned in her seat to see Hermione standing next to her with Ron hovering behind. The bushy haired girl was carrying a plate with a couple of ham and cheese sandwiches which she presented to Ginny as she sat beside her.

"We brought you something to eat," said Hermione quietly as Ginny took the plate in hand.

"Thanks, I completely forgot about lunch," said Ginny, picking up a sandwich and taking a bite. As she chewed she tried to think back to the last time she had eaten, but couldn't remember.

Ron sat down on the bed next to Harry's and looked worriedly at her, "You missed breakfast as well.

And supper last night."

'Why do I already know where this is going?'

Ginny looked up from her meal, "You've missed quite a few meals as well."

"But not three in a row, Ginny," he pressed. When she glowered dangerously at him he licked his lips but refused to quail under her fierce gaze. "Okay, I'll buy that when Harry shared the power of his Order of the Phoenix with you--"

"Give it a rest, Ron," she cut him off, "You and everybody else have been bothering me about that ever since the attack. It's starting to become old news."

"Don't get mad about it, Ginny," soothed Hermione, patting her on the knee, "We understand why you kept it a secret. Ron just means to say that even with the Order's power you can't keep on like this."

Ginny turned to look despairingly at the other girl, "I'm not using any power from the Order. I don't think there's any left."

Hermione frowned, "What d'you mean?"

"I think Harry used all of it up during the fight," she explained, "That's why he was in such a bad way and why he's taking so long to recover. He doesn't have the Order to help him through this."

The three children sat silently after that, considering Ginny's words as she quietly finished the sandwiches Hermione had brought. Once she was done she tried to set the empty plate aside somewhere but could not find any free space. Finally she settled for putting it underneath her chair and then resumed her vigil over Harry.

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Ron, having watched her, looked around the cluttered room and asked, "When did Fred and George come by?"

Ginny smiled, "Around noon, I think. Before lunch."

"How... how did they... how did they..." Ron could not seem to form the words, too caught up in disbelief at his older brothers latest stunt.

"Not a clue," she answered, her smile growing broader. She had no idea how the two of them had pulled it off, without help. All she did know was that Madam Pomfrey was going to go crazy when she finally came in.

"Ah," came an exclamation from the doorway, drawing their attention, "I see that Fred and George have once again outdone themselves."

Professor Dumbledore, resplendent in his deep purple robes, strode into the infirmary. His blue eyes were twinkling brightly as he surveyed the twins' handiwork. Picking his way down the rows of beds he finally reached them and pulled up a chair to sit in.

'He's earlier than usual,' noted Ginny, checking her watch.

"Minister Fudge has just been to see me," explained Dumbledore, "His concern about Harry's wellbeing apparently prompted his visit."

"Why would Fudge care?" asked Ron scathingly, "Other than that it would look bad in the Daily Prophet."

Ron and Ginny's opinion of the Minister had never been all that high, but over the past few years it had been dropping at a steady rate.

First he had sent Hagrid to Azkaban, however briefly, during the Chamber of Secrets mess. Then he let that git Malfoy come within an inch of getting Buckbeak executed. And only last year he had, with remarkable stupidity and stubbornness, refused to believe the truth when Harry told them that You-Know-Who was back.

Dumbledore's eyes were almost glowing with amusement as he actually grinned impishly at the three children, "His concern for Harry stems from the fact that Harry is the only person capable of brewing the antidote to Set's Bride, a particularly lethal poison that Harry tricked him into drinking around Christmas."

"Harry poisoned Fudge?" asked Ron incredulously, "He poisoned the Minister of Magic?!"

"So Cornelius believes," confirmed Dumbledore with a smile, "In truth it is nothing more than an exquisitely executed charade on Harry's part. Suffice to say the Minister is somewhat gullible."

Hermione looked positively scandalised, "Are you saying that Harry pretended to poison Minister Fudge in order to blackmail him?"

'From the sounds of it, yes.'

Ron was beaming with wicked delight, "Go, Harry!"

"Ron! Honestly!" berated Hermione, looking sternly at her boyfriend.

"Harry's methods of late have been somewhat questionable," agreed Dumbledore, turning his eyes to where Harry lay, "but these are extraordinary times which generally call for unconventional, if not desperate, measures."

"But still!" Hermione argued, "He shouldn't do things like that! The Minister is on our side in this."

'Fudge is a coward,' thought Ginny grimly, 'He's only ever on his own side.'

Dumbledore smiled, "Thanks to Harry he is. Even after the attack on Hogsmeade Cornelius was unwilling to admit that Voldemort has returned. Harry's actions secured us his cooperation, willing or otherwise."

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As they conversed Ginny noticed that Ron was no longer following their conversation and was instead looking past them towards the infirmary's entrance. He cocked an eyebrow and muttered, "Now this is a surprise."

Ginny turned to see a tall, short-haired ash blonde girl with large sapphire eyes standing in the infirmary doorway. Since it was a Sunday she was not wearing her Hogwarts robes, but was dressed in a pair of pale blue jeans and a dark green silk shirt with the tails knotted, baring her flat midriff.

If Draco Malfoy was Slytherin's influential spoiled brat and Pansy Parkinson was Slytherin's queenbitch, then Blaise Zabini was Slytherin's centrefold.

From what Ginny had overheard, the boys were constantly arguing who was better looking, Blaise or the Patil sisters. All they could ever agree on was that the cool demeanoured Slytherin was one of the prettiest girls at Hogwarts.

"Let me guess," said Blaise, looking around, "The infamous Weasley twins."

Ron nodded in confirmation, "The two and only."

"I thought I recognised their work."

"As I understand," said Dumbledore, "it is something of a long standing joke between them and Harry here."

"Mrs Weasley is going to a conniption when she hears about this," observed Hermione.

Ron grinned evilly, "D'you think she'll send them a Howler?"

Ginny, keeping her eyes on Blaise, replied, "We can but hope."

Almost every Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff had come by to visit Harry at least once, though without any of the night time escapades that resulted in losing house points. The number of Slytherins to come visit was greatly less than the other houses. Mostly it had been first and second-years that came by, although some of the older students had made what looked like token visits.

Of course some of the Slytherins, in other words Draco Malfoy, were a bit preoccupied. Since the attack on Hogwarts and the aftermath there of Draco's father, Lucius, was a wanted man. Despite anything the Minister might say, or any of the Malfoy influence, nobody could dispute his being present during the fray.

'Maybe it's a good thing Harry did poison Fudge. Or pretend to that is.'

Now, after eye witness accounts by a full division of Aurors and a good many students, doubtless including Harry when he woke up, Malfoy's involvement as a Death Eater could not be disputed. Only the previous weekend had Ron and Ginny's father, Arthur, had led a Ministry sanctioned raid of Malfoy Manor, which had resulted in close to tripling the charges already laid against Lucius Malfoy. The only reason Malfoy senior had not yet been arrested and brought to trial was that nobody had a clue as to where he was. He, along his fellow Death Eaters and Voldemort, had disappeared from the battle in, literally, a flash of light. Acting on Harry's last coherent sentence the English Ministry was working closely with the Central American Ministry of Magic in an attempt to locate the missing felons, but had so far met with no success.

'Unfortunately snakes are notoriously hard to find and catch.'

With his father now a wanted man, unable to show his face for fear of been apprehended, and his ancestral home seized and impounded by the Ministry, Draco Malfoy had been in a livid mood for the past week. The thought that he would deign to come within fifty yards of the Hospital Wing, and Harry, was ludicrous.

Blaise was the only Slytherin that came by with any regularity. For that matter she visited the Hospital Wing with almost monotonous regularity. Sometime in the afternoon every day Blaise would come in briefly, more often than not accompanied by Padma Patil and a few other Ravenclaws. She did not stay very long, just enough to ask if there had been any changes.

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This, however, was the first time Ginny could remember seeing her here alone.

'For a Slytherin she's almost decent most of the time.'

"I gather there hasn't been any change?" asked Blaise quietly, still standing by the door.

None of the four sitting around Harry's bed could fully hide their pain at that statement. Ron visibly winced, as though struck; Hermione ducked her head and rapidly blinked her eyes to hold back her tears; Dumbledore's moustache curled in an unhappy grimace and Ginny clenched her hands into fists and bit her bottom lip.

All four of them had been watching Harry closely every day, perhaps even more so than Madam Pomfrey, and the only change they had yet to see in Harry was the slow fading of the many bruises on his face and arms, which lay above the covers.

"Not that we can tell," answered Ginny, "Madam Pomfrey will be come to check on him in about half an hour."

Blaise nodded and made as if to leave. Before she stepped back outside she looked over her shoulder

and asked, "If he wakes up let me know, 'kay?"  
Ginny nodded silently.

\*\*\*

The two men were sitting in comfortable looking chairs, which surprisingly enough actually felt comfortable as well, facing one and another across a small table. The elder of the two watched the younger man with hawk-like intensity, his impenetrable black eyes following every movement. He was perched on the very edge of his chair, stroking his chin thoughtfully as he considered the pieces standing on the chessboard between them. Frowning slightly he raked a hand through his unruly black hair and then looked up at the old man, his jade coloured eyes sparkling.

"And now we finish this."

With casual ease the young man reached for his one remaining knight and shifted the wooden figure up and across, setting it down with a flourish.

"Checkmate," he smirked, settling back in his amazingly comfortable chair. He smiled at his defeated opponent, "Looks like I'm not dead yet."

"Two out of three?"

"..."

"That's what I thought."

\*\*\*

He was lying on a bed in the Hospital Wing.

Harry did not even need to open his eyes to know this. He had probably spent more time in the infirmary than all the other students at Hogwarts combined. And he still had two years to go. After so much experience waking up here, Harry easily recognised the crisp and starched linens under him. Then there was that unique herb and antiseptic smell that permeated the rooms, always reminding Harry of a Muggle hospital with some form of incense burning.

'Anyone here?'

**\*Harry, you're awake!\***

**\*Thank the beyond, we've been worried more than you would believe.\***

**\*How do you feel?\***

'Like I got into a fight with Voldemort and lost.'

**\*Not too far from the truth that.\***

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**\*We've been funnelling the Order's power into your recovery, but the going has been slow.\***

**\*Very slow. You drained the Order so completely it took us over a week before we had built up enough energy to start even that.\***

'How long have I been out?'

**\*Two weeks.\***

**\*I think you should wake up now. You have visitors.\***

With a groan of protest, another following as late afternoon sunlight streamed into his eyes, Harry's eyes fluttered open. Wearily he looked around and spotted Ginny, Ron, Hermione and Professor Dumbledore sitting excitedly in some chairs by his bed. Only the headmaster seemed to be restraining himself, settling instead for a warm smile, as the other three were practically bouncing in their seats.

"Harry?"

"Last time I checked, yeah." His voice was a harsh rasp and Harry could barely recognise it as his own. Ginny, sitting closest to where his head lay, reached for a tall glass of water that was resting on the nightstand and handed it to him. "Thanks."

He took a long, soothing sip, letting the cool water slide down his throat. Lowering the glass he settled it in his lap and looked at his friends and mentor, all watching him with anxious yet relieved expressions. "Sorry I'm late," he apologised with a tired smile, "but I had to finish a game of chess first."

"A game of chess?"

"Don't worry about it. Ron," Harry told his friend, leaning back against his pillow and letting his eyes drop shut. After a while he opened them again and looked hesitantly at Dumbledore before asking, "Casualties?"

"None, praise the heavens," Dumbledore told him, eyes twinkling merrily. "Although one of the Aurors, Ms Bagnall was struck in the shoulder by a forest troll spear. Amongst the students; Mr Longbottom received a rather nasty concussion and broken arm, while Mr Boot of Ravenclaw broke both his legs."

Hermione leaned forward to elaborate, "Neville was so excited we actually won that he tripped going down the stairs and took Terry with him."

With a grimace Harry shook his head, "Could have been worse I suppose. He could have tripped Cho instead."

Hermione smiled, "He did, only she didn't end up with anything worse than a bruised rear."

Suddenly Ginny hopped out of her chair and knelt next to Harry on the bed. She pulled him up into her arms and began squeezing the life out of him, "Thank Merlin you're awake. You have no idea how worried we've been for you."

"Sorry," he apologised, hugging her back, "Guess I kind of screwed things up."

Ginny pulled back just a bit and then leaned in to give Harry a passionate kiss. It was only by some quirk of fate that he managed not to spill the glass of water he was holding. They were at the point of giving in to the fiery desire burning within them, despite Harry's weakened state, when the soft

clearing of a throat reminded them that they were not alone.

'And we continue to be interrupted.'

With a start Ginny jerked away from Harry, her face flushed from the kiss and turning an even deeper shade of red with embarrassment. Harry gently held her to his side with his free hand, looking around her to see Dumbledore looking highly amused.

"Ah, sorry," he apologised again, feeling his own cheeks blushing.

"Quite alright, Harry," forgave Dumbledore with a smile, "I understand completely."

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"Why Mexico?" suddenly blurted Ron, capturing Harry's attention.

"Huh? 'Scuse me?"

Dumbledore's blue eyes were sparkling, but his expression was a serious one, obviously this was something he too considered important. "I believe Ronald is asking why you sent Voldemort and his Death Eaters to Mexico."

'I sent them to Mexico?'

"Mexico?" asked Harry, thoroughly bewildered. After thinking about it for a few seconds he gave a helpless shrug and said, "Well, I guess they had as much of a chance being sent there as anywhere else."

"What do you mean?" asked Ginny.

Harry took a sip from his drink of water and then answered, "The teleportation portion of the spell I used is a little... unstable."

Hermione leaned forward, her interest sparked, "Unstable? How?"

"There's no consistency regarding where it sends you to," explained Harry, wincing at the fact that the spell he had used, not to mention created, was far from complete.

"So why did you tell us you'd sent them to Mexico?" demanded Ginny.

"I was delirious," shrugged Harry apologetically, "Mexico seemed as good a place as any."

"So they're not in Mexico," summed up Ron.

Harry gave a shrug, "For all I know they could have ended up in the Dursleys' back garden."

They were interrupted by a gasp of horror that drew their attention to the doorway, where Madam Pomfrey was standing. For the first time since he had awoken Harry gave the infirmary a proper looking over as Pomfrey began a howling tirade that he had no doubt could be heard throughout the castle.

**"FRED AND GEORGE WEASLEY!!!"**

Harry found himself unable to do anything but drop his head back against the fluffy pillow behind him and laugh until tears streamed from his eyes and he could no longer breathe.

All throughout the Hospital Wing, covering every bed, every chair, table and stacked in untidy piles across the floor were hundreds upon hundreds of Hogwarts toilet seats.

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## 22. End of the World

Red and gold banners seemed to almost entirely cover the Quidditch pitch. It was now mid April and the last game of the season, a rematch between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw, had just drawn to its end. Understandably the Slytherins had raised something of a fuss over the fact that the match was going to be replayed. Malfoy in particular had made voluble and, unfortunately, audible complaints about the matter. He claimed that since the match was already forfeit the two teams should not be allowed to continue.

"Stupid, ingrating git," grumbled Ginny, looking over towards the morose Slytherin section of the stands. None of their protests had amounted to anything and in the end they had been unable to do anything but sit back and watch Gryffindor play to victory.

Silly house arguments aside, Ginny beamed with delight as Harry stepped up onto the podium and accepted the Quidditch Cup from Dumbledore. A roar of approval rose from the crowd, a mix of Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. Public opinion of Harry had been riding high since the attack on the school and nobody, except the Slytherins, failed to show their appreciation for the Boy-Who-Lived.

Even as Harry lifted the Cup high over his head in victory the crowd of students was going wild. All around Ginny the various Gryffindors she had been sitting with were jumping and screaming in delight. Ron had grabbed hold of Hermione and was spinning her around in his arms, her laughter bubbling forth despite her protests.

Lowering the Cup down and cradling it in the crook of one arm, Harry waved Fred and George as well as the three Chasers up onto the podium to join him. As the five oldest members of his team stood arrayed before him Harry presented the massive trophy to them with a flourish.

Loud cries of approval rang out as Fred and George took the Cup in hand, one on either side, and raised the gleaming gold prize. Angelina, Alicia and Katie were bouncing around the two Beaters in seeming delirious joy, waving their arms and screaming and squealing ecstatically.

*'It's their last year,' agreed Ginny silently, 'They deserve it.'*

Harry watched their antics with amusement before turning to shake hands once again with Dumbledore. Professor McGonagall, in a surprising display of emotion, came forth and swept him into a congratulatory hug before backing away, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief.

Having released Hermione from his grasp, Ron grabbed Ginny by the arm and pulled her up onto the stage with him. The rest of the reserve team; Seamus, Moira and Gareth, were right behind them and quickly joined in the celebrations.

Ron grabbed Harry's hand and began shaking it wildly, yelling his congratulations over the noise of the crowd. Before Harry could do or say anything Seamus came up and grabbed his other hand, also shaking it fiercely. Moira had run up to Fred and George and pulled them both into a hug to rival one of their mother's and was alternating kisses between them and occasionally screaming something in Gaelic.

"We won! We won! We won! We won! We won!"

Ginny turned at the repeated victory chant, smiling as she saw Dobby bouncing around. Alongside him were easily three dozen other house-elves, but they were celebrating with more restraint.

*'Harry has created a monster or two.'*

*\*He's good at that.\**

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Just then Ginny felt a pair of strong arms slip around her waist and spin her around. She found herself being pulled into a close hug with Harry, who was beaming at her. She smiled back and rose up onto the tips of her toes to kiss him. One of Harry's hands slid sensuously up her spine to cradle her head as they leaned against each other and deepened the kiss.

The cat calls and wolf whistles from the twins only lasted long enough for Fred and George to hand the Cup over to Ron and then sweep their own girlfriends into, perhaps overly dramatised, kisses.

After that the hoots and whistles came from the crowd as the twins were now busy.

Harry pulled away slightly, ending the kiss. Ginny moaned at the sudden lack of contact, finding it difficult not to wantonly press herself against him. They stood close, still wrapped in each others arms, and resting their foreheads together.

"Now this is a proper celebration," murmured Harry, kissing her affectionately.

"Much better than last time," she agreed, thinking back to how Fred and George had interrupted them after the game against Hufflepuff.

He grinned and trailed his one hand slowly down her back to her hips. His bemused words echoed her own thoughts just a moment earlier, "I think they've learnt that interrupting us tends to be hazardous to their health."

Ginny teasingly ground her hips against him, causing Harry to groan deep within his throat and tighten his grip on her. She smiled and looked at him coyly, "Even if they haven't, we're going to be getting away from them tonight, aren't we?"

"If you keep that up," gasped Harry in a strained tone, "I'll die before then."

"What? This?" She smiled wickedly and repeated the action, eliciting another groan and a flush of bright red to Harry's cheeks. As his breath left him in a long sigh a heartfelt plea managed to escape his lips.

"Help."

\*\*\*

Relentless teasing. That was what Ginny was doing to Harry. And unless something happened to stop her, he was going to go out of his mind. Not that he minded really, since having her tease him like this was definitely enjoyable, if occasionally uncomfortable.

Unfortunately no end seemed to be in sight, since the couple were going out for a private victory celebration. Harry had proposed the idea to Ginny the week before, immediately after his release from the infirmary. After a week in the Hospital Wing (three counting the two spent unconscious) getting away undisturbed with Ginny was Harry's idea of paradise.

Since it was their first official date, Ron had protested half-heartedly about it, Harry had decided not to pull any punches. He fully intended for the evening to be one Ginny would never forget. As such Harry had been pulling more strings behind the scenes for this one date than he had while preparing Hogwarts for attack earlier in the year.

Sirius had almost had a heart attack when Harry had owled him about his plans. But Harry had been persistent and had, after much cajoling, managed to convince both his godfather and Professor Lupin to consent. After that he had taken his proposal to Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall and secured their permission as well.

Everything had been planned and considered to the last detail. Harry had even sent a letter to Arthur and Molly Weasley, asking for their permission. He had half been expecting a Howler from Mrs Weasley, but had been pleasantly surprised by a return letter conveying their blessings.

Lastly Harry set about making reservations at the restaurant, making absolutely certain that Ginny did not have any idea where they were going. With the table booked and a discrete means of transport arranged, everything was finally ready.

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Letting Ginny tease him mercilessly, for the duration of Gryffindor's victory party, would only add to everything that was to follow.

*'It had better, because she's coming very close to driving me mad here.'*

***\*Mad with desire, Harry?\****

*'I am so glad I can shut the door on you people and get some privacy,'* thought Harry, grabbing a bottle of Butterbeer from one of the snack tables set up in the common room. *'I know I would certainly never get through the night sane if I had you lot making lewd comments about everything that happened.'*

***\*We'd never do that.\****

***\*Of course we would. There's no point in being grown up if you can't be childish sometimes.\****

***\*What's wrong with being childish? I like being childish.\****

*'Bye bye,'* Harry gave his voices a mental wave, *'I'll see you in the morning. Don't wait up.'*

***\*Just have her back by midnight and don't scratch the--\****

Harry sat down in one of the comfy armchairs by the fire and sighed, *'Thank the bliss that is silence.'*

The victory party had lasted from the end of the match through most of the afternoon. Spirits were high and the noise level even higher. It was now nearly dinner time and a few students had departed for the Great Hall. Most of the others however were content to remain in the common room and continue to celebrate with the bounty of sweets and whatnot that Fred and George had managed to acquire from the kitchens.

Harry and Ginny however would be joining neither the dinner in the Great Hall nor the continuing party in the Tower. About an hour ago they had both excused themselves from the common room and gone upstairs to shower and change. Harry had only just come back down, dressed in black pants and a dark green shirt that matched his eyes. He was waiting for Ginny to come down, enjoying a last Butterbeer before they left.

"Harry, mate!" a hand clapped down on his one shoulder. Harry twisted his head to see George standing behind him.

"Good to see you, skipper!" another hand clapped down on his other shoulder and Harry saw that Fred was also standing behind him.

He smiled up at them both and set his Butterbeer down on the floor beside the chair, "Fred, George.

What can I do for you?"

The twins leaned in on him, obviously trying to look menacing. "You're going on a date with our little sister," rumbled Fred, scowling heavily.

George grimly nodded his agreement, "You do anything underhanded and we'll make sure you regret it till your dying day."

Harry shot a glance to the stairs leading up to the girls dormitories just in time to see Ginny descending into the common room. His breath hitched at the sight of her and he was dimly aware of the twins, and everyone else, turning to look. Swallowing the lump that had risen in his throat he mumbled softly, "If I live that long."

Even her overprotective brothers would have to admit; Ginny was looking beautiful beyond description. She was dressed in a simple, yet elegant, midnight blue evening dress. It hung from her shoulders by thin spaghetti straps and the cut was tantalizingly low. Her hair was a fiery halo that framed her face and fell to her shoulders. Harry was pleased to see that she was also wearing the silver and ruby necklace he had given her for Christmas.

"Better take a stick with you," muttered Fred, looking at his sister in a mix of awe and worry.

"Yeah," agreed George, "You'll be needing it to beat off all the other blokes."

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With a delighted smile on his face Harry rose up from his seat and left the twins behind, not bothering to answer or comment. He crossed to where Ginny was standing at the foot of the stairs, waiting for him with a mysterious smile.

"You look..." he stood before her and shook his head, almost at a loss for words, "truly beautiful. I should take you out more often."

"That you should," she told him, still smiling slyly. Linking her arm with his they made their way to the portrait hole, saying their goodbyes as they slipped out.

"So now that our date has actually started," said Ginny as they walked down the corridor, "are you going to tell me where we are going?"

"It's a surprise," revealed Harry, wondering why she was smiling with what looked like secret satisfaction.

He quickly found out the reason for her smile as Ginny leaned close to him, "Well, I have a surprise for you as well." She leaned in closer and whispered into his ear.

Harry drew back in complete shock and stared at her, utterly dumbstruck. His disbelieving eyes raked up and down her slender form, snugly encased in the blue fabric of her dress. His mouth tried to form a coherent sentence, "You - you - you don't... you don't... you're not... nothing at all?"

"That's what I said," purred Ginny, obviously pleased by his reaction.

"Well, after a revelation like that," Harry blew out a breath and looked at her, "I suppose it's the least I can do to tell you where we're going."

Ginny grinned and wrapped her arm around his waist, holding him close, "So?"

Wondering how he was going to survive their date now that he knew her dress was pretty much the only thing Ginny was wearing, aside from her shoes and the necklace, Harry bent his head down to kiss her lightly on the cheek.

"We're going to the end of the world."

\*\*\*

Reality twisted around and then suddenly slammed to a halt. Ginny almost fell flat on her face, but Harry grabbed her by the elbow and steadied her. The inconspicuous leather wallet, which was in fact the Portkey that had brought them here, dropped to the ground. After making sure that Ginny was standing firmly on her own two feet, Harry bent over and scooped it up.

Until the Order's power, though steadily rebuilding, returned to the levels it had held before the battle against Voldemort, Harry had decided to forgo Apparation. With the Order's power it would have been fairly easy for him to Apparate the two of them through Hogwarts' wards and to their destination, but Harry wanted to fully recover before drawing on the power once again.

Still unsteady from the Portkey's disorienting means of travel, Ginny looked around at her surroundings. If she was not mistaken Ginny realized that they were now somewhere in London. She

had seldom been to the city, aside from Flooing to Diagon Alley, but she did recognise one to two of the landmarks.

She grinned at the realization, thrilled by the fact that Harry was obviously putting to a great deal of expense and effort into their date. She had originally been envisioning spending the evening in one of the restaurants or public houses down in Hogsmeade. A trip into London was not only a great deal better, but much more exciting.

Enthralled by the glittering lights of the city, reflected on the river they had arrived beside, Ginny almost jumped as Harry traced his hand softly across her left shoulder blade. Gathering her wits about her Ginny turned to face him.

Liquid fire seemed to be burning in his eyes as he looked at her, a satisfied smile playing on his lips.

He was definitely looking pleased with himself.

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Leaning in close, Harry gently took Ginny's lips into a soft kiss. Her eyes threatened to drift shut, but she could not break away from his intense gaze. Harry sensuously trailed his hands along her sides, pulling her closer to him and pressing his body against hers.

*'Oh, I've really gotten him worked up tonight.'*

"Surprise," he whispered, drawing back.

"That it is," Ginny agreed breathlessly. After a moment or two she smiled, "I hate to tell you this, but London is not the end of the world, Harry."

Harry grinned broadly, "The city isn't. The restaurant certainly is."

Ginny puzzled over his meaning for a second, until Harry turned her away from the River Thames and towards the building standing behind them. Then his little joke and play on words became perfectly clear to her.

It was clearly a wizarding establishment, she could tell that easily enough just by looking. From the outside it did not appear particularly imposing, in fact it gave the impression of being rather cosy indoors. Being a magic building however, it was likely to be considerably larger when viewed from the inside.

More than anything else it was a restaurant. And not just any restaurant, but one that Ginny had heard very much about. A restaurant she had never believed she would ever see the inside of, not unless something of a miracle occurred.

*'Obviously it just has,'* Ginny thought in amazement. She was not even aware that her jaw had dropped until Harry reached out a hand to push it closed, chuckling at her reaction.

The Ragnarok.

It was the most exclusive magical restaurant in the world. The Ragnarok catered for only the wealthiest, most powerful and famous witches and wizards. Reservations for a table had to be booked months in advance and often included a substantial fee. Even the Malfoys, before Lucius' dark arts dealings had been revealed, had probably been forced to wait months for the opportunity to dine here. That Harry had apparently been able to secure a table for the two of them in less than a week was something unheard of. In fact Ginny knew of only two other wizards that were on the approved list for immediate service; Professor Dumbledore and Minister Fudge. Ginny had no doubt that Draco Malfoy would have a seizure upon learning that Harry had brought her here.

*'This is incredible. None of the girls at Hogwarts will believe me when I tell them.'*

"Mr Potter," greeted the doorman as the two teenagers walked up to the entrance. He was a tall and almost imposing figure, but carried himself in an only slightly threatening manner. He was dressed in what Ginny recognised as a Muggle tuxedo, which fit tightly across his broad shoulders and athletic frame. He gave a familiar nod of his head to Harry, "It is good to see you again. We have been expecting you."

"Thanks Drew. This is Ginny Weasley, who will be dining with me tonight," said Harry, motioning at Ginny. He turned to Ginny and indicated the doorman, "Gin, this is Andrew. He guards the entrance here at the Ragnarok."

Andrew smiled warmly at Ginny and presented her with a short bow before waving them towards the door, "A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Ms Weasley. If you will follow me, I will show you to your table."

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Ragnarok's cuisine was the finest in the world and one of the many reasons why the restaurant was so highly renowned. Of course, as far as Harry was concerned, they could have served gruel and Bubotuber pus and neither he nor Ginny would have complained, if they even noticed.

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Ultimately the two young lovers were perfectly content merely being in each others company. No doubt discovering this would send the chef into a state of high dudgeon, but there was no need to worry about it. The meal was truly delicious and by the time they were finished, not a morsel would be left on the plates.

Still, it did say something positive about Harry and Ginny's budding relationship that they were more interested in each other and the food set before them. It was also a great relief for Harry, and Ginny as well he suspected, that they could talk so readily to each other. Considering Ginny's reactions to him when she was younger and Harry's own inherent shyness, it was something of an accomplishment that they had progressed so far so quickly.

Slowly the night wore on and soon the pair found themselves finished with their desert, a treat that had specially done up for them by the chef. Neither Harry nor Ginny had the faintest idea what it was

exactly, other than it consisted of ice-cream, lots of chocolate and something minty.

"No! You didn't!"

Harry smiled at Ginny, sipping on his after-dinner coffee. For the past half hour they had been talking about his first year at Hogwarts, filling her in on all the juicy bits Ron had not told his family.

"Of course I did!" he confirmed, "I was only eleven. How was I supposed to know how to fight a full grown mountain troll?"

"But sticking your wand up its *nose*?" Ginny asked incredulously.

He shrugged, "That was an accident. Really. I think I was aiming for its eyes."

"Arry?"

They both turned to look at the woman standing by their table. Harry blinked in surprise and then rose from his seat in greeting, "Fleur! This is a surprise."

The beautiful young woman nodded and suddenly grabbed Harry by the shoulders. In his surprise Harry almost blew a hole through her midriff, but froze stiff as a board when Fleur leaned in to kiss him enthusiastically on both cheeks.

"Ah!" exclaimed Fleur as she pulled away from Harry, leaving him in shock, and turning to face Ginny. The youngest of the Weasley children was looking very much as if she would be perfectly happy to blow the hole through Fleur that Harry had failed to. That is until Fleur pulled her into a tight hold and repeated the kissing action, "And zis must be your friend Ron's sister, qui?"

Harry sank into his seat, noting that Ginny was looking almost as shell-shocked as he felt. He knew Fleur had a softer side, ever since he had 'rescued' her sister Gabrielle from the lake. This open display of affection towards him, however, was somewhat out of character.

*'Of course I barely exchanged a dozen words with her last year,' he thought, looking up at Fleur, who was smile benevolently down at them. 'I don't really know enough about her character to judge.*

*Besides, I was one of her opponents at the time, we weren't supposed to talk with each other.'*

He caught Ginny's eye and was somewhat surprised to see her smirk at him. Clearly whatever threat she had felt from Fleur's arrival had dissipated. The French girl clearly had no designs on Harry beyond simple friendship.

"So, Fleur," he said after catching his breath, "what brings you to London?"

"Ah," Fleur waved a hand expressively, "As I told you last year, after ze tournament, I have been looking for a job, 'ere in England. I 'ave been speaking wiz Professor Dumbledore and will be taking ze post of professor of Ancient Runes next 'Ogwarts school year."

Ginny chuckled appreciatively, "I imagine attendance rates for Ancient Rune will climb higher than a dragon."

Fleur grinned amiably at her, "Qui. Ze Veela charm assures zat I will 'ave my students' full attention."

*'Somehow I think their attention will be on their teacher rather than their lessons.'*

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"So Professor Jones is retiring?" asked Harry, "I hadn't known that."

"Qui," confirmed Fleur, "'E wishes to begin field work translations for ze Gringotts Goblins in Cairo. I am just waiting 'ere in London until ze end of term. Zen I will be at 'Ogwarts preparing."

"Ron will certainly be pleased," observed Ginny with a wry smile, "I imagine Hermione is going to have to hit him upside of the head quite a few times."

Harry cocked an eyebrow at her, "You seem to have developed a taste for physical violence where your poor brothers are concerned."

Ginny glowered introspectively for a moment, "After being on the receiving end of their pranks and teasing for fourteen years, I think turnabout's fair play."

*'They prank you, so you put them in the Hospital Wing. That makes sense.'*

"You 'ave a lot of brothers, do you not?" asked Fleur. At Ginny's nod Fleur gave her a commiserating smile and shrug, "I fortunately am blessed with only Gabrielle, who is hardly ze demons I believe your brothers are."

"How is Gabrielle?" asked Harry, wondering after the little girl he had pulled from beneath the lake, during the second task.

Fleur grinned impishly at him, "Very well and quite taken by you, 'Arry. I think she will be 'eartbroken to 'ear you have already taken a lover."

Ginny, who had been quietly sipping her coffee, choked and gaped up at Fleur with wide eyes and a cacophony of sputtered protests. Harry took satisfaction that his own blush, which was burning his cheeks, was not nearly as noticeable as his date's.

*'Lovers? Thank the heavens Ron didn't hear that. He'd be out looking for a unicorn before either of us could even begin to protest.'*

Harry smiled as Ginny, still gasping for breath, and tried to feebly protest Fleur's statement.

*'At least, for the time being, he won't have an excuse to kill me after finding one.'*

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## 23. As the O.W.L flies

It was the first day of exams and Harry, along with Ginny, Ron and Hermione, was reluctantly dragging his way to breakfast. For three of them it signalled the beginning of what was supposedly a tortuous affair that would only ever be matched by the dreaded N.E.W.T.s.

Fred and George had not been helping matters with the tales of horror they had been sharing with the fifth-year Gryffindors. In fact they seemed quite delighted by the idea that their younger brother, his girlfriend and their sister's boyfriend, were taking their O.W.L.s.

They had even attempted to tease Ginny about it, and the fact that she would be suffering much the

same fate the following year. Her solution, however, had been to threaten the pair of them with another visit to the Hospital Wing. The twins immediately ceased their teasing, which Harry supposed was a very wise idea considering how Madam Pomfrey was still somewhat annoyed with them over the incident with the toilet seats.

"Today's Charms, at ten o'clock," Hermione was saying as they walked, the massive tome Harry had given her for Christmas floating by her side. "Professor Flitwick said it would be a three hour written exam, followed by some practical work after lunch..."

Harry and Ron already knew this of course, but Harry realized Hermione was just a bit nervous and trying to keep herself occupied. She had acted in much the same manner before their exams in all of the four previous years, but now she seemed slightly more anxious.

*'Must be the pressure,'* he mused as they continued walking.

"Then, of course, on Wednesday..." the fluttered girl continued, looking over her specially put together study schedule as well as the exam timetable they had been given.

"Is Defence Against the Dark Arts," Ron finished for her, reaching a hand over to pluck the pieces of parchment from her hands. "Don't worry, Mione, we all remember when we have what."

Hermione looked at her boyfriend with round eyes, "Worry? Why would I be worried? I'm not worried!" She quickly became flustered and suddenly turned to look pleadingly at Harry, "Harry, tell him I'm not worried!"

Harry looked across at his best friend and rolled his eyes, "Ron, Hermione is not worried." He then waited just long enough for Hermione to breathe a sigh of relief and turn back to Ron when he added, almost as an afterthought, "Hermione is panicking. There's a difference."

"Harry!"

"He's got a point, Hermione," agreed Ginny, grinning mischievously. "You're getting very worked up about all this. Wouldn't it be better if you tried to relax?"

"Hermione relax for an exam? That happens all the time, doesn't it Harry?" asked Ron. As he said this he pointed off to one side, "Oh, look! There goes a squadron of pigs right now!"

"Ron!" protested Hermione, smacking him lightly on the arm, "It's not funny! This is serious!"

Harry decided to get in on the act and asked, "Sirius? Where?"

Beside him he heard Ginny groan and pat him on the back, "Down boy. Stop wheedling your friend and try being supportive, okay?"

Harry and Ron looked at her with raised eyebrows, pretending to be appalled. "Where's the fun in that?" they chorused, earning rolled eyes on behalf of the girls.

They were just stepping into the Great Hall when they became aware of a loud commotion that was filling the room. For a moment they stood in the doorway, wondering what was going on that could cause such excitement.

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*'It must be something good,'* thought Harry, looking at the students already in the hall, *'They wouldn't be laughing so much, or so hard if it wasn't.'*

Taking the lead Harry stepped into the Great Hall and started weaving and pushing his way through the crowd of students blocking the way. He could feel Ginny, Ron and Hermione following closely behind him and then suddenly he broke through the mass. All four of them spotted it at about the same time as they cleared the jumble of laughing students.

"The Slytherins!" gasped Ron, looking as though Christmas come early and with a pot of gold as a bonus, "They're... they're... they're..."

"Pink," Harry finished for him, sounding very much in awe of the sight.

There was simply no other way to describe it. The Slytherins were... pink. All of them. And not just any kind of pink, but a brilliant, glowing, neon, bubblegum kind of pink. Their hair was pink. Their faces and hands, and probably their entire bodies as well, were pink. Their normally black school robes were pink, as were the clothes they were wearing underneath. Their shirts were pink. Their pants or skirts and shoes were pink.

Everything.

Vibrant pink.

For one ridiculous moment Harry wondered if perhaps Gilderoy Lockhart had returned to Hogwarts and was trying to throw a belated Valentine's Day party. Then he shook his head and continued to gape at the amazing spectacle.

Not only were the Slytherins, their robes and clothes, pink but everything else associated with their house was also pink. The Slytherin table was pink, matched by the equally pink benches and assorted cutlery. Harry was amazed to see that even the knives and forks were pink.

*'Heck, even their food is pink,'* he thought in something of a daze.

***\*So are their bags and books and other school things.\****

***\*I wonder if they'll be able to read or write with pink ink on pink parchment.\****

"Bloody brilliant," breathed Ron, such a look on his face that Harry could easily believe his friend had just discovered the secrets of life, the universe and everything.

**"POTTER!!"**

The furious roar drew everyone's attention towards the staff table, only to immediately burst into laughter at the sight that greeted them.

Snape.

Pink.

*'Merciful heavens I'm going to die laughing.'*

***\*This is even better than the time Loki turned an entire Roman Legion into pelicans.\****

***\*I wish we had thought of this.\****

"You did this, Harry?" asked Ginny incredulously as the Potions Master bore down upon them, his neon pink robes billowing behind him in a very unintimidating manner.

***\*It's difficult to be properly intimidating when you're completely and utterly pink.\****

"Believe me," said Harry, eyes fixed on Snape with amazement, "if I had I'd definite accept full credit for it."

Snape drew up in front of the four Gryffindors, scowling as fiercely as he could considering his condition. "I'll have your prefect badge for this, Potter!" he screeched in a voice that could be heard all the way to Hogsmeade. "This is an outrage! This is..."

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"Calm down, Severus," came the soothing voice of Professor Dumbledore, who had just entered the Great Hall. The headmaster slowed walked up to where the furious professor was standing, his blue eyes sparkling with barely repressed delight. "I am certain young Harry and his friends had nothing at all to do with this."

Harry nodded dumbly, still focused on Snape. He was aware of Ginny and Hermione nodded at his sides, both gaping openly at the pink vision standing before them. It was Ron that actually managed to say something, "I wish we had!"

Snape wheeled on Ron with an expression of such malice that all the students, save Harry and Ginny, flinched back a step or two. Before the livid professor could speak a burst of noise erupted from the Slytherin table and everyone turned to see a mass of fireworks exploding overhead.

Naturally the fireworks were also a glowing pink.

"Remind me to kiss the ground Fred and George walk on for the rest of the day," Ginny whispered to Harry as everyone stared, entranced, at the display.

"You think they did this?" he asked, eyes fixed on the pink sparkles and explosions.

Ginny arched one fiery eyebrow, "We're talking about the boys that stole every single toilet seat in the entire school."

Harry nodded his agreement and said, "You're right. Besides, who else would be crazy, or stupid enough to do this?"

***\*Just a guess here, but; Fred and George?\****

'Shut up, I'm enjoying this.'

***\*Who wouldn't be?\****

***\*Those poor sods that are done up entirely in pink?\****

***\*Other than them.\****

"We're going to lose every last point we have," moaned Hermione, looking despairingly at the chaos strewn Slytherin table.

Harry had to admit she was probably right, the Gryffindors had lost so many points while trying to sneak into the Hospital Wing to see him that they were definitely out of the running for the House Cup this year. After a moment consideration, however, Harry shrugged.

"After seeing this, it will be worth it."

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Wednesday snuck up on the fifth-years quickly, not difficult considering how busy they were with theirs O.W.L.s. In Defence Against the Dark Arts, as with their Charms and Transfiguration exams, there was a large written test followed by a practical session in the afternoon.

The obstacle course Professor Lupin presented them with was somewhat similar to the one he had put them through two years earlier. Of course it and made use of more formidable creatures and obstructions for them to pass through, one section of which included a short duel with the tired looking werewolf.

Naturally Harry was the only student to win his duel against Lupin, although Ron and Hermione performed admirably as well.

The last part of their O.W.L. exam took place back in the classroom, where Professor Lupin planned to evaluate their mastery (or lack thereof) of the Patronus Charm. For this Lupin had decided to employ Harry as an assistant, because he felt that the best way for the students to demonstrate their Patronus would be against a Dementor.

'Wonderful,' thought Hermione as Lupin explained this to them, 'It was bad enough having to be up on the ramparts during the attack. Now he wants us to be in the same room as one of those thing?'

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Lupin had cleared the room to make space and arranged the students at one end, while he and Harry stood at the other with a large trunk between them. After clearing his throat and garnering the students' attention, Lupin told them, "We already have explicit proof of the quality, not to mention the quantity, of Harry's Patronus, so I feel there's no need to test him on this. Still, he will be using us by attracting the attention of the Boggart in this trunk..."

Only the professor, Hermione and Ron knew that when confronted with Harry a Boggart would assume the form of a Dementor, so Lupin was forced to clarify his statement after most of the students expressed their puzzlement.

"When the Boggart see Harry here it will change into a Dementor," explained Lupin, "It will take on all the attributes of a Dementor, including the ability to prey on your memories. On my order you will step forward and attempt to use your Patronus to force the Dementor back."

"What about you and Harry?" asked Dean, "You'll be right next to the thing."

Lupin waved the concerns aside, "Not to worry. Patroni only attack Dementors so you have no need to

fear us being hurt by anything you conjure up. And I'm certain you will all agree that Harry and I should be able to handle one Dementor between us."

'Lord, I hope so,' prayed Hermione, recalling what horrors Harry heard whenever in the presence of a Dementor.

"You'll be going in alphabetical order," said Lupin, "Ms Brown, I believe that makes you first."

Lavender stepped forward from the rest of the class to where Lupin indicated and stood at the ready, wand in hand. From her place at the side of the class Hermione could see her nervously lick her lips. All of the Gryffindor fifth-years had participated in the defence of the castle in March. None of them would ever forget the stifling cold that the Dementors had produced.

Lupin looked from Lavender to Harry, "Ready?"

Harry drew his wand, but kept his arm hanging loosely at his side. He nodded his readiness and Lupin turned back to Lavender. After a moment the girl took a deep breath and also nodded, lifting her wand up and aiming it at the rattling trunk.

With a nod of his own Lupin reached for the latch keeping the trunk closed and flipped it open. He then took several steps back and waited. The lid of the trunk was knocked back and after a pregnant pause the Boggart rose up from inside the trunk. Unfortunately it had not taken the form that they had been expecting, that of a Dementor.

It was much worse.

"Come on Harry," the words were spoken with dripping venom, "Wands out d'you reckon?"

Hermione had never seen Harry freeze in action before. She had seen him pause to consider his options or sometimes even hesitate. But now he stood frozen on the spot, a look of sheer terror on his face. Even when he reacted in his sleep, to the nightmares that plagued him, he never looked so utterly afraid.

Of course everyone else was frozen where they stood as well, even Lupin who was staring at the emerging Boggart with an aghast expression on his tired face. The Boggart, however, was firmly focused on Harry and started to slowly prowl towards him as it stepped out of the trunk.

"What's wrong Harry?" it asked in Cedric's voice, smiling maliciously, "Don't you want to take out your wand? What's the matter? Afraid you're going to kill me again?"

Harry began to back away, his feet almost tripping over themselves as he retreated from the slowly advancing Cedric. His face had drained completely of blood and Hermione found herself even more worried for him now than when he had been in the Hospital Wing.

Cedric smirked cruelly when Harry's back hit the wall behind him, leaving him trapped with the Boggart slowly closing in on him. "Come on, Harry. It's not like they can kill the spare twice now, is it?"

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Harry's wand clattered noisily to the floor and with a low moan Harry's knees gave out and he slid helpless down the wall.

"Hey!" cried Lupin and stepped forward, trying to distract the Boggart away from Harry.

There was a flash of light and a sound like breaking glass. Cedric literally flew backwards through the air, crashing against the opposite wall of the classroom with bone breaking force. Harry, still collapsed on the floor, had taken his wand back in hand and had it pointed firmly at the Boggart as it too fell down.

'Thank the high heavens,' Hermione breathed a sigh of relief.

With a snarl Cedric lifted his head and glared ferociously at Harry, his teeth bared in anger and normally grey eyes glowing a deep red. Harry swallowed and tried to steady his wand arm, which was shaking violently. "Riddikulus!" he managed to say, jabbing his wand in the general direction of the Boggart.

There was a loud crack, like a whip, and suddenly Cedric's demeanour changed entirely. It gave Harry a sidelong, conspiratorial, glance and then said something that sounded utterly ridiculous to everyone that hear it.

"Take a bath," he said, looking around nervously as though someone might overhear, "and - er - take the egg with you, and - er - just mull things over in the hot water. It'll help you think... trust me."

Hermione's brow puckered in puzzlement, 'What in the world?'

Harry just sat there, staring at the Boggart with wide eyes and taking deep breaths. Even though the creature had ceased taunting him he seemed unable to regain his composure.

"Tell you what," Cedric continued, "use the Prefects' bathroom. Fourth door to the left of that statue of Boris the Bewildered on the fifth floor..."

"Thanks, Cedric," Harry interrupted, his face looking torn. He levelled his wand at the Boggart, who was now listening politely, and said, "Goodnight."

Cedric, the Boggart, exploded into a billion pieces. Everyone in the room stared in shock at where the creature had been, that and the gaping hole that Harry had just blown through the stone wall. It reached from the floor to the ceiling and was nearly four, maybe even five, yards across.

'Oh my...' Hermione thought, clutching a hand to her chest. She could feel her heart beating a wild rhythm beneath her fingers.

Long seconds passed and then Lupin, who had been staring in distress at the massive hole, turned to Harry and shook his head. He seemed almost unable to speak and could only just choke out, "Harry. I... I..."

"Get out."

The two words were flat, expressionless and completely devoid of emotion. Harry was still backed

against the far wall, on his knees and staring into space. Lupin took a hesitant step towards him but stopped at a wave of Harry's empty hand.

"Just get out. All of you," he said in a dull tone. Hermione could see that he was starting to tremble and shake as he drew his knees up to his chest and hid his face behind them.

"I want to be alone."

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"Good afternoon!" boomed Hagrid as they arrived at the paddocks for their Care of Magical Creatures practical exam the following Monday. None of the Gryffindors could offer anything more than a lukewarm greeting and the Slytherins did not offer even that much.

"I got a really treat for yer exam today," Hagrid continued as they all lined up, "Truly magnificent creatures these. A bit temperamental if yeh handle them wrong, but fine beauties."

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*'Please,'* prayed Ron, closing his eyes for a second, *'Anything but Skrewts.'*

"What are they, Hagrid? And where are they?" asked Harry, propping himself against the wooden fence and looking around the seemingly empty paddock. He seemed to have pushed the incident with the Boggart during Defence Against the Dark Arts behind him, but occasionally seemed to become preoccupied.

Hagrid beamed at them all, his black eyes shining happily "Drakes! I expect they're hiding under the dirt. Burrow down they do, y'see."

Ron felt Hermione tense up beside him and nervously clear her throat, "Um, Hagrid? You're not talking about Fire-Drakes, are you?"

"Aye, that I am!" exclaimed Hagrid happily and clapped his hands, "Of course, there might be a Cold-Drake or two in th' batch, I'm not sure. Guess we'll have to wait an' see."

At Hermione's mention of the hidden creatures' full name, Harry pushed off from the wall and looked incredulously at Hagrid. His bright green eyes were wide and full to the brim with disbelief, "Fire-Drakes? Cold-Drakes?" he managed to brokenly get out, "Hagrid, those things are practically dragons!"

A wave of alarm washed over the students and Ron was aware of several of them actually taking long steps back. Neville gave a piteous squeak and the blood in his face drained away to the degree that he resembled a sheet. Even Malfoy, who was normally disdainful about anything Hagrid brought before them, shifted uneasily on his feet.

"Not really," said Hagrid, not trying to dampen his enthusiasm, "Drakes are only about eight or so feet long, about five high at the shoulder. An' they don't have wings like dragons."

Harry buried his face in his hands and moaned. Hermione, swallowing audibly, stepped forward and asked, "How will we be able to tell the Fire-Drakes from the Cold-Drake?"

A familiar drawl came from where the Slytherin students were standing, "The Fire-Drakes breath fire, Granger. I thought that much was obvious."

"How clever of you to know that, Malfoy," noted Harry dryly.

"Not really," drawled Malfoy, looking smugly at them, "When you're surrounded by imbeciles on all sides, any marginally intelligent observation seems like a stroke of genius."

"Enough o' that," chided Harry, stepping between Ron and Malfoy, preventing Ron from leaping at Malfoy as he wanted to do. Hagrid raised one hand to his mouth and used his fingers to blow a shrill whistle. "Now let's see if we can rouse them up for yeh to get a look at them."

At the sound of Hagrid's almost deafening whistle the students looked at the paddock to see the upturned earth begin to shift and tremble in places. Here and there dark green limbs and tails began to break free from the soil as the Fire-Drakes dug themselves out of hiding.

The beasts did indeed look very much like miniature dragons and Ron could understand Harry's worries about handling them. Their lithe, yet sturdy limbs were densely packed with layers of muscle that rippled and stretched as the Fire-Drakes rose up onto their hind legs and began prowling about the enclosure with long, loping strides.

"Crikey, they're beautiful," Hagrid breathed with admiration.

Ron had to admit the Fire-Drakes did have a certain predatory beauty, but he would much rather have been facing a Blast-Ended Skrewt than one of these sleek killing machines. He, along with the rest of the fifth-years watched in awe as the Fire-Drakes hissed and stretched wide their narrow jaws to display rows of gleaming teeth.

*'Damn. With a set of choppers like that these things don't need to breath fire to be dangerous. And look at those claws!'*

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Naturally the only student that failed to show any respect for the beasts was Malfoy, who walked up to stand by the wooden fence. He peered over it and snorted disdainfully as several of the Fire-Drakes bumped and brushed against each other.

"Clumsy looking things," he sneered, turning away with cultivated disinterest. This proved to be a mistake as one of the Fire-Drakes apparently heard him and quickly trotted over.

Whether the animal knew that Malfoy had insulted it was debateable, but it reacted very much as if it had understood every word. It came to halt several yards from the fence, Malfoy completely unaware of its presence. For several seconds it seemed to consider the oblivious boy standing before it. Then it took a deep breath and exhaled violently, twin tongues of flame spurting from its nostrils.

"AAAAEEEEEOOOWW!"

Ron, standing not ten feet away, could not decide whether to be amused or alarmed as Malfoy started wailing like a banshee. The pale Slytherin began running around in a circle, flailing his arms wildly

about and howling continually as his hair burned and crackled merrily.

**"WWWWWOOOOAAAI!"**

Ron saw Hermione and Neville both take steps forward, their wands out and clearly ready to help, but Harry moved in front of them.

"Let me handle this," Harry said, waving them to stay where they were. With a casual motion of his right hand he conjured up a large steel pail, filled to the brim with water. As Harry lifted it up Ron, in a flash of premonition, knew what he was going to do.

**"YYYYYAAAAEEERR!"**

Harry rose up high on the balls of his feet, the pail of water above him, and then brought his arms down in a sharp motion. The water seemed to almost explode down from the bucket and fell over Malfoy with almost stunning force, immediately extinguishing his flaming hair.

An instant later, the watching students didn't even have time to see the expression on his face, Malfoy's head vanished from view. The reason for this was that Harry had effectively slammed the pail down without stopping, jamming the container over the frantic boy's head.

There was a hollow sounding noise, like a large and cracked bell ringing. Malfoy's water drenched body twitched about for a few seconds and then toppled over. He fell to the muddy ground like an axed tree and landed with a thump, the pail clanging as it to hit the earth.

Everyone crowded into a circle around Malfoy and Harry. For a long minute nobody could think of anything to say, all too busy wondering if Malfoy was still alive. Ron had no doubts than none of the Gryffindors would complain if he wasn't.

Ron just stood there and felt his mouth stretch into a broad and uplifted grin of delight. Even if Malfoy wasn't serious injured, this was the funniest thing Ron had seen since Moody, and then later Harry, had transfigured the git into a ferret.

*'I need to find Colin before Malfoy wakes up,' he thought gleefully. 'If I don't get a picture of this I'll never forgive myself.'*

The first person to speak, oddly enough, was Blaise Zabini. She nudged Malfoy's immobile body with the toe of her shoe and then smirked towards Harry, "Y'know, Potter, if it weren't for the fact that Weasley's sister would kill me for it, I'd honestly be tempted to *kiss* you right now."

"It was nothing special," replied Harry nonchalantly, "Dennis Creevey did something similar to Ron when his shoes caught fire. Besides, I've been wanting to do something like that for years now."

Blaise's smirk broadened, "You're not the only one."

Surprisingly enough more than a couple of the other Slytherins nodded their heads in agreement at the statement.

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Snape narrowed his eyes and tried to ignore the desperate burning of his right arm. He glared at the short little man that was leading him one, silently fuming that such pathetic filth as Peter Pettigrew should lead him anywhere.

It was late in the night and he had just had to hurry out of Hogwarts and away from the ever present anti-apparation wards surrounding the school. Even if this was probably a summons from the Dark Lord to discuss his actions during the battle in March, Snape was not in a good mood. The only thing Snape was grateful for at the moment was that the horrid pink colour had finally faded away, leaving him with his normal sallow complexion.

"We are almost there," announced Pettigrew, trying to sound important.

Snape snorted, "So I can see."

Spread out before them in the open field, arranged in a large circle, were Voldemort's servants, the Death Eaters. For a moment Snape had almost thought of them as his fellow Death Eaters, but had quashed the thought as if formed. He would sooner gnaw off his hands than admit that any of these people were associated with him in any way.

As he and Pettigrew reached the edge of the circle of Death Eaters, Pettigrew slipped away, leaving Snape to stand beside someone he knew quite well. Even with his black robes and the faceless mask, Snape could not mistake Lucius Malfoy for anyone else.

"Lucius," he greeted coolly, "I'm pleased to see that you too survived the little side trip Potter arranged."

"I have every intention of making him regret it," rasped Malfoy, his voice not carrying the smooth resonance it once held.

Snape looked at him with some curiosity, "Where exactly did the stupid boy send you? He was babbling something about Mexico..."

Malfoy shuddered, "Worse. Siberia."

"Siberia?" Snape arched an eyebrow almost to his hairline. Speculation about where exactly Potter had sent Voldemort had been rife. The most common opinion, or most hoped for, was either the Amazon jungle or Antarctica. The wastelands of Russia had never even been considered.

"We lost Damion to the cold," Malfoy continued, indicating a vacant space in the circle, where a Death Eater was clearly missing. He then motioned to another empty spot, "Langley was a total lose as well, but for a different reason."

"What?" asked Snape with morbid curiosity.

"Cruciatus."

At the sound of the silky voice all the Death Eaters stiffened to attention and Snape followed their lead. Voldemort had stepped into the circle from the other side and quickly strode to its centre. His

eyes seemed to glow in the darkness they peered at Snape.

"Potter was somehow able to rebound the curse back onto young Langley," explained the Dark Lord, his teeth bared in a snarl, "Even after he dropped his wand and lost consciousness the curse maintained its hold on him. Lucius even snapped the wand in half, but the magic would not cease until the fool's mind was completely destroyed."

Snape swallowed, making the decision to never annoy or pick on Potter again. He had not seen the battle himself, the Weasley girl had seen to that, but he had heard reports of it. If Potter was able to reflect a Cruciatus Curse back on the caster until the man was driven insane, then he was even more dangerous than Snape had realized.

Without saying anything the Potions Master dropped down onto his knees and bowed low before Voldemort. The act was degrading yes, but he had no choice if he wanted to convince them of his sincerity. The act of pushing The-Boy-Who-Lived off the Astronomy Tower had fair certainly cemented his credibility, but there was no need to take any chances.

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"My service and my life are yours... My Lord," he declared in what he hoped was a differential tone of voice.

"In that case, Severus" Voldemort's crimson eyes narrowed and he smiled malevolently at Snape, his teeth bared ferally. Snape felt himself tense, unconsciously aware of what was coming next, "I think we should properly welcome you into the fold once again..."

"Crucio!!"

\*\*\*

With a shout Harry jerked awake, almost sending himself flying off his bed. He looked around in a moment of blind panic for a moment before gaining his bearings. Catching his breathe in shallow gasps, he reached for the glass of water on his nightstand.

Listening carefully to the quiet sounds of the dormitory, Harry became aware of the sweat that was literally dripping off him. After several minutes he settled down again, thankful that the multitude of Silencing Charms surrounding his bed had prevented his cries from disturbing his fellow fifth-years.

*\*Harry?\**

*'You lot feel that?'*

*\*Hard to miss. Your scar's burning like crazy.\**

Swallowing the last of the water, Harry set the glass aside and stared up at the ceiling.

"Well, that's it then," he muttered to himself, "The holiday is over. He's back."

*\*And just in time for the summer holidays too\**

*'Yay.'*

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## 24. Return to Normalcy

"D'you think anybody would mind if I completely erased the Dursley's personalities and gave them new ones?"

Everyone standing around him looked at Harry with expressions ranging from puzzlement to outright horror. Harry matched their gazes with a bland expression, looking for all the world as if he honestly meant what he said. The frightening thing was that he really did.

Even with the Order's power helping him perform magic outside of Hogwarts without detection, Harry felt as eager to return to Privet Drive as he always did. In other words; not at all.

"Harry, you're not serious, are you?" asked Hermione, looking at him with wide eyes.

"Well, you have to admit," commented George, "the idea *is* tempting..."

Hermione rounded on the twin and glared at him, "George Weasley, don't you *dare* say things like that!"

Harry sighed and turned to look up at the castle, half hidden by hills and trees, trying to take strength in the knowledge that he would be back in only a couple of months.

*'It's going to seem like an eternity,'* he silently groaned.

*\*For you and us all.\**

His fifth year at Hogwarts had drawn to a close and now he, along with his friends and fellow students were down at the Hogsmeade train station. Most of the crowds had already boarded the Hogwarts Express for their journey to platform nine and three-quarters, but Harry and his little group were taking their time.

For six of them this was the last time they would be seeing Hogwarts as students. Fred, George and Lee were taking it pretty well - laughing, joking and reminiscing over the many good days and detentions they had spent there. The girls were proving more emotional and only Angelina had not yet burst into tears, although she was looking very misty eyed.

The younger teenagers were also feeling less than ecstatic about leaving as they were now faced with imminent separation from their significant others. Ron and Hermione had it worse than Harry and Ginny, since Hermione would only be coming to the Burrow for the last day or two of the summer.

Unfortunately this did not make Harry feel any better.

"Don't let it get you down, Harry," Ginny tried to comfort him, standing close and running a hand between his shoulder blades. "Before you know it it'll be your birthday and you'll be coming to stay with us."

"I know," Harry sighed and turned to smile at her, "But a month with my 'family' is an experience I wouldn't even wish on Snape."

Ginny smiled at him and asked in a playful tone, "What about Malfoy?"

Harry pretended to pause and think about it, "Maybe."

All conversation was interrupted by a chill wind that suddenly gusted around them. Despite the onset of summer the weather was oddly foul and matched Harry's own dispirited mood. A pall of steely clouds hung low in the air and the sun had been hidden behind them for the past week. It was a cold day and the season could easily have been mistaken for late autumn.

Harry scarcely noticed and even if he had he would not have cared. Everyone else was dressing in jumpers and jackets with robes and cloaks wrapped around them to stave off the biting wind. Harry had on just a pair of jeans and a loose-fitting t-shirt.

The cold was nice. Comforting in a way.

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"Brrr!" shivered Fred, rubbing his hands up and down his arms, "Bloody chilly, isn't it?"

"Wonderful way to start off the summer," agreed Fred, pulling his robe tighter.

Ron frowned at his older brothers, "Would have been better if we'd won the House Cup. I'm not saying I didn't enjoy seeing pink Slytherins but if you two had held off the pranks just a bit we might've had a chance of beating Hufflepuff and coming third instead of stone last."

Lee waved the younger boy's complaints away, "Come on, Ron! No force on earth, not even Harry, could have helped us win the Cup. So what was wrong with making the most of our remaining time at school? At least it was Ravenclaw that won and not the Slytherins."

"Besides," chimed in Angelina, sniffing a bit, "You have to admit; it was worth it."

"Was it ever," gloated Fred, grinning with delicious satisfaction.

George swung his arms around Alicia and Katie's shoulders and sighed, "Ah, pink Slytherins... if only we'd thought of it for the Quidditch match."

Ron snorted, "If you had we'd never have won the game."

"Yeah," agreed Lee, "Our players would have been too busy laughing at them to play properly. Flying around on their brooms like pink..."

"Moirra would have still hit Bludgers at them," said Ginny with conviction.

Hermione nodded, "That girl is far too violent."

Harry smirked at her and chuckled, "I imagine my PFT classes will be a lot more lively with her in them next year."

"She'll only a third-year next year, Harry," said Ginny, reminding them that only fourth-years and above were permitted to attend Practical Fighting Techniques.

"Dumbledore decided to extend it down to third-years," replied Harry, remembering the conversation he had had with the headmaster the previous week.

With Voldemort's return explicitly confirmed and his dramatic attack on Hogwarts several months ago, Dumbledore agreed that the students would need all the advantages they could get. They had even talked about maybe obtaining an assistant to help Harry during his lessons.

Remus Lupin had seemed like a good choice, since he would not be continuing as Hogwarts' Defence Against the Dark Arts professor. Unfortunately his tenure at the school had been terminated so that he could pursue activities elsewhere in Dumbledore's service. As such Lupin was unavailable and Dumbledore was preoccupied with find a replacement for the position the following year.

*'I still wonder if he was joking when he said he might higher me for the job.'*

***\*Heh, could you imagine it?\****

***\*Imagine Malfoy's face if he found out.\****

"Come on," urged Hermione from one side, pulling on Ron. "The train's leaving in a minute or two. We'd better get onboard."

"Alas!" cried Fred dramatically, "Dear Hogwarts, how we shall miss you!"

"Let us count the ways!" agreed George, pretending to swoon.

Ginny looked at her comedic brothers and noted dryly, "Not to mention the detentions."

The twins gave their sister a mock offended look before grinning and jumping onto the steam engine's rear carriage. Everyone else followed after them; Ron and Hermione leading the way to their customary compartment.

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With ten of them crowding into the one compartment it was a tight fit, but somehow they managed. It was mostly thanks to the girls, who saved space by finding more or less comfortable seats in the laps of the five boys. Of course the boys did not find the situation as comfortable, especially when their partners deliberately started wiggling about.

*'Don't think about it,'* thought Harry in a strained tone as Ginny pressed her rear against him. When she started to surreptitiously grind around in small circles that seriously disrupted his blood flow, Harry swallowed and his thoughts became a mantra, *'Don't think about it. Don't think about it. Don't think about it. Don't think about it.'*

***\*You're thinking about it,\**** noted a bemused female alto.

*'Oh God, please don't let her feel that...'*

Ginny turned her head to look at him and smiled in the same smugly superior way she had during their date at the Ragnarok. The date where she had tortured him mercilessly for hours with the knowledge that she had not been wearing anything beneath her dress.

"You okay, Harry?" she asked teasingly, wiggling provocatively against him.

"I'm going to pass out," Harry managed to say, amazed that his voice did not sound as strangled as he had thought it would.

Ginny arched an eyebrow and asked with a knowing grin, "And why's that?"

Harry looked her in the eyes and grinned back, deciding to play along. He lifted his hands up and

gently placed them on Ginny's hips. With a knowing smirk that rivalled her own, he pulled her tightly to him and purred into her ear, "Lack of blood to my brain. It's all being diverted somewhere else."

**\*Harry!** protested several feminine voices in the back of his head as he watched Ginny's face suddenly blossom with a remarkable red.

"Gotcha," he whispered with satisfaction. He then drew away just enough to tenderly brush his lips against hers. They were prevented from continuing their flirtations as the train gave a brief jolt and the gleaming red steam engine whistled shrilly.

As the Hogwarts Express pulled out of the Hogsmeade train station and began its winding journey towards London, Harry leaned against the window he was sitting beside. Pressing his cheek against the cool glass he looked out at the place he considered a second home, maybe even his proper home. Fifteen minutes later he was still watching, long after Hogwarts had vanished from view.

\*\*\*

In an occurrence that everyone agreed was something of a miracle the entire journey from Hogwarts to platform nine and three-quarters was accomplished without any interruption by Draco Malfoy. As they disembarked the train it was Ron that commented on this, with a mixture of satisfaction and disbelief.

"Smarmy git's beginning to learn," he declared as they lumped their trunks onto the trolleys they were pushing.

"Took him long enough," grumbled Harry, lifting his trunk into the air with almost no effort and depositing it on his trolley. Once certain that it was firmly in place he turned around to grab Ginny's trunk and transfer it from the carriage to her trolley.

*'He's so sweet that way,'* thought Ginny, watching him handle her trunk. *'He doesn't even realize how exceptional he is.'*

"Only five years," agreed George with a grin.

"Not to mention countless beatings this year, eh Harry?" asked Fred, grinning wickedly.

Ginny shook her head and playfully wagged a finger at her brothers, "You two are incorrigible."

"Y'know, Gin-Gin," countered Fred, deliberately using that annoying nickname they had assigned her during the year, "You certainly lack the Weasley sense of humour."

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"Only when the joke's not funny," she snapped back, narrowing her eyes at him. *'I might have to hurt them if they don't stop calling me that.'*

George clasped his hands at his chest and groaned theatrically, "Oh! Touché!"

The two tricksters beamed at Ginny as she hissed in annoyance. She wondered how she was going to survive the summer being cooped up in the Burrow with them both. Watching them both grinning at her with demented relish, she started to take a step towards them, ready to cause them physical harm.

"Relax, Gin," soothed Harry, patting her on the shoulder, "You know they don't really mean anything by it."

"I know," she sighed, trying to rein in her annoyance, "I'm just worried that I'll end up being the butt of all their jokes again now that we're home."

Harry looked at her and arched his eyebrows, letting his eyes wander downwards, "And a very nice butt it is too."

Absolute silence descended over everyone standing around them. Ron and Hermione were openly gaping at Harry, both in disbelief. Alicia, Angelina and Katie seemed to be blushing, although Angelina was definitely the most composed of the three. Lee was staring at Harry in what looked like admiration and the twins...

*'Just swallow me up'* Ginny prayed to any and every god that might happen to be listening.

Ginny had thought their expressions after turning the Slytherins pink had been wickedly evil.

Compared to how they were looking at Harry and her now, that had been almost stoic. The fierce blush rising up to burn her cheeks was certainly not helping matters.

**\*Take some deep breaths before you spontaneously combust.\***

**\*Now you know how Harry felt before your date.\***

*'Oh Lord, just swallow me whole.'*

Before any of those watching could speak Ginny looked from Harry to her trunk and asked in as calm and nonchalant a voice as possible, "Did you pack my sword, Harry? You know how easily I get stressed out and there's nothing like cutting things in half in order to relieve the tension."

Fred, George and Ron, being her brothers, wisely decided to keep their mouths shut and not tempt fate by teasing Ginny. All three were well aware of just how adept their little sister was when using the sword Harry had given her for her birthday. Of course the fact that Ginny had put each of them in the Hospital Wing at least once during the past year might have something to do with their silence as well. Unfortunately for Ginny, the others were not hampered by this fact since they were secure in the knowledge that they did not have to live in the same house as the threatening teenager.

"Why use a sword to relieve your tension, Ginny?" asked Angelina with a lecherous smirk, "I'm sure Harry would be happy to oblige you instead."

"Actually, Ang," leered Katie, "I think she was talking about Harry's sword."

Ginny had never felt so openly horrified in her entire life. Well maybe, but this certainly rated somewhere in the top ten. Stifling a groan she turned back to Harry and dropped her head against his chest, knowing that the teasing had only just begun.

"And we all know how deft Harry is with his sword," chirped Lee, shaking so much with barely repressed laughter that his dreadlocks were bouncing wilding about his head.

*'I'm going to kill them. I'm going to kill them. I'm going to kill them. I'm... I'm... damn he's a good*

*kisser...'*

With a suddenly content smile Ginny pulled slightly back and opened her eyes. Harry returned her smile and reached up to stroke her cheek with the back of his hand. His green eyes were sparkling brightly and he looked more lively than he had in days.

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"I'm going to miss being able to do that for a whole month," he told her.

"It's only a month," she reassured him, smiling at him. Ginny pressed back against him and leaned up for another kiss, "At least nobody's interrupting us anymore..."

"Harry! Ginny! Boys!"

She should have know better than to jinx the situation by speaking that out loud. Unfortunately she did and the moment before their lips could meet they were joined by smiling presence of Molly Weasley.

Looking up at Harry in silent apology Ginny sighed and turned to face her mother, who appear positively delighted to see them.

*'Me and my big mouth.'*

\*\*\*

Harry remained waiting in King's Cross station for nearly an hour after Ginny and the rest of the Weasleys had departed. He had already known that Uncle Vernon would not be coming to pick him up for his return to Privet Drive. Thus he was planning to Apparate to his 'home' in Surrey, which he also knew would no doubt terrify and appal his relatives.

The only real reason for Harry's delay in returning was his reluctance to face Vernon, Petunia and Dudley. Despite everything that had happened over the years and his efforts his family had never liked him and were, to put it plainly, openly disgusted by him.

His situation in number four Privet Drive had improved the previous summer, after he had merged with the Order of the Phoenix. Unfortunately his family's change in attitude had nothing to do with Harry himself, but rather his newfound ability to practice magic at home without having to worry about the Ministry punishing him for it.

In other words he was forcing the Dursleys to act courteously towards him through simple intimidation.

And so, reluctant to return home, Harry waited in the train station. He had left platform nine and threequarters at the same time as the Weasleys and Hermione, and was now leaning against one of the barriers. With his trunk and other possessions resting beside him, Harry was watching the world around him.

The Muggles passing through King's Cross were almost entertaining to watch.

There was a man wearing a deer-stalker hat and dressed in a distinctly unattractive looking tweed suit. All told he looked rather like a diminutive and portly Sherlock Holmes, albeit without Doctor Watson. The man strode past Harry, taking as long a strides as his legs could manage, a handkerchief held to his nose. As he went by Harry could hear him muttering to himself, apparently engaged in a running commentary on the state of England's health.

"...God-forsaken island... barrage of cold germs... brood of catarrhal bulldogs... bloody travelling TB sanatorium... nasal spray through the keyhole... pestilential island... worse than the Great Plague..."

Harry watched with amusement as the rotund man retreated from his sight. His attention was soon diverted by a loud shout in a language he identified as German.

**"Mein Gott in Himmel!!!"**

He turned to watch as three children, two girls and a boy, about his own age walked past. The one girl was dragging the boy after her, her auburn hair whipping his face as he trailed behind her. The boy, with dark brown hair and soulful eyes, followed meekly as the redhead berated him in a constant stream of insults.

"What were you thinking? Or were you thinking at all? Idiot baka!"

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The girl's rant continued without halt in a mixture of English, German as well as Japanese. The boy, who seemed to be suffering from the same sort of resignation to his fate that Gryffindors felt when attending Potions, kept trying to apologise. Unfortunately this only seemed to incite the redhead into a new string of invectives.

Harry's eyes were then drawn to the third child of the trio, the other girl. Of the three she was actually the most visible, even if she was silently watching the antics of her companions. This probably had something to with her hair, which was cut in a short bob that framed her face. It was powder blue.

Glancing down at the watch Ginny had given him for Christmas, Harry noted the time and decided that he should probably be Apparating to Privet Drive. With a resigned sigh that seemed to match that of the still apologising boy, Harry reluctantly departed the station.

"Okay, Hedwig," he said after ducking around a corner and out of sight. He reached to the cage his snowy owl was sitting in and released her, letting her perch on his arm. "I know you don't like Apparating, so I'm going to let you go here, alright? I'll leave the window open so you can come in later tonight."

With a nibble of his finger and a soft hoot Hedwig took to the air. Harry watched her fly away until she vanished from view in the dull grey of the cloud covered sky. Lifting his trunk from the trolley he had been using he set it at his side and kept a hand on it as he disappeared from King's Cross with a pop.

The world swirled around him and Harry felt a fuzzy sensation, like having too much blood rush to his head. He blinked once and looked around the second bedroom in the upstairs part of number four Privet Drive.

"Home sweet home," he noted sarcastically. He deposited his trunk at the foot of his bed and then moving to open the room's open window as he had promised Hedwig. Pulling off his coat Harry threw it upon his bed and swiftly exited the room.

He could hear Dudley from the top of the stairs, accompanied by the soothing tones of his aunt as she tried to placate him. Personally he thought they sounded like a squealing pig and a shrill hag respectively. As he quietly stepped down the stairs Harry noted that he could not make out Vernon's bellowing voice amidst the noise coming from the kitchen.

At the bottom of the stairs Harry paused for a moment to consider the cupboard door. The cupboard under the stairs had been his home for ten years. It was small, dirty and had a number of wiggly things inside it, but he could not deny that some small part of him missed it.

*'Everything seemed so much simpler in there,'* he thought nostalgically.

Repressing the sigh that threatened to escape his lips, Harry turned away from the cupboard and strode purposefully into the kitchen. Dudley and Petunia's conversation, if it could be called that, drew to an instant halt as they saw him.

"I'm back," he said, stating the obvious.

Harry watched with amusement as Dudley's face drained of blood and grew a pale and sickly green as the overweight boy squeaked with alarm. He noted that despite the Smeltings nurse's best efforts Dudley had lost any significant amount of weight since last Harry had seen him.

Standing beside her son Petunia's long face also pales and she dropped the glass of orange juice she had been holding. The glass fell to the tabletop and splashed the juice everywhere over its smooth surface. Harry watched as his aunt ignored the mess and began fidgeting nervously, puzzled over why she was acting so out of character.

*'I'm not that frightening, am I?'*

***'I think she's worried you might give her that horse's tail you promised last summer.\*'***

*'Oh yes. I'd forgotten about that. Thanks for reminding me.'*

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Harry was about to speak when a sound from behind him registered on his ear. It was a clicking sound that he found strangely familiar. Very familiar in fact. It was metallic and he knew that he had heard it before, but could not remember where.

With some mild curiosity Harry turned where he stood and as his eyes came about he realised just where he had heard that clicking sound before. He had heard it dozens, hundreds, maybe even thousands of times before. On the television when Dudley was watching some late night or mid afternoon movie.

It was the click of a hammer being cocked.

*'Somehow,'* he thought, with a strange sense of calm detachment, *'I always knew it would be the Dursleys that killed me.'*

And Vernon pulled the trigger.

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## 25. Breaking Point

Molly Weasley watched silently as her only daughter trudged morosely up the crooked stairway to where her room was waiting. Obviously Ginny was feeling a little depressed at being separated from Harry for the first half of the summer.

Truth be told Molly didn't know whether or not to be relieved or sympathetic. Relieved that her baby girl was finally away from Harry, who despite everything was still a hormone charged teenager. Sympathetic because Molly could remember feeling the same when she was younger and Arthur had to leave for work. She still felt that way, of course, but over the years had grown accustomed to the feeling, especially knowing that her husband would eventually be coming back.

"All right then," she said after a moment, having waited for Ginny to round the first landing and step out of sight. Molly turned to her three youngest boys and beckoned them follow her into the kitchen before going up to their rooms.

"Charlie!" exclaimed Ron as he entered, catching sight of his older brother.

Seeing their dragon taming elder sibling at home was a surprise for them, since they had thought Charlie was still working in Romania. He had only arrived the day before, having kept his visit as a surprise for everyone.

Molly busied herself making a cup of tea while the four men caught up on what had been happening. By the time she was finished and sank down into her chair at the kitchen table, Fred and George had just succeeded in making Charlie fall out of his seat for the third time in five minutes.

"Boys," she announced, drawing their attention as Charlie pulled himself up, muttering about pink Slytherins. Once she was certain she had their firm attention, Molly asked, "I'd like to talk to the three of you about Ginny and Harry."

Ron started with a horrified expression on his face and the twins immediately began to look very uncomfortable. It was obvious that none of them liked the idea of discussing their baby sister's love life, especially with regards to their friend.

"Well..." George thought about it, "They've been flirting since practically the moment we arrived at school. In fact I think they tone it down a bit when they're not alone."

"They've kissed a few times," admitted Fred, reluctantly, "but they don't make a scene over it. I'm pretty sure they haven't done more than that."

At this Ron shifted uncomfortably in his chair and a distinct blush graced his cheeks. Molly spotted his reaction and immediately turned to him, "Ronald? What is it?"

"Nothing."

Unfortunately Molly could always tell when her children were lying to her, especially Ron, only the twins were any good at hiding the truth from her. Deliberately she narrowed her eyes and fixed Ron with a look she had spent years perfecting. Soon Ron began squirming under her gaze but before he could speak they were interrupted by a blur of red.

Ginny seemed to explode into the kitchen, her hair flying around her as she crashed into the table, knocking Molly's cup of tea over the edge. The girl was out of breath and had clearly run downstairs from her room. One look into her panicked eyes stifled any reprimand Molly had felt brewing.

"Ginny, honey? What's wrong?" she asked, dreading the answer.

"Harry."

\*\*\*

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Arthur Weasley blinked once, twice, as the world faded back into being around him. One glance at the mayhem outside number four Privet Drive was enough to confirm his fears. Molly was flitting about in a flustered panic, much as she had after the Death Eater attack on Hogwarts. The twins, Ron and Charlie were standing in a tense knot nearby, alternately trying to becalm their mother and... *'Sweet Merlin... is that a sword?'*

Ginny, his youngest child and only daughter, was attacking the front door of Harry's home in an almost animalistic rage. With her wand firmly clasped in her left hand, 'But she's right handed,' and a gleaming katana in her right, Ginny was yelling and screaming at the top of her lungs, which had attracted the attention of most of Privet Drive's residents.

"I didn't think your daughter would be able to cuss up such a storm," commented Mundungus Fletcher, who had Apparated at Arthur's side.

"No kidding," agreed Perkins, standing next to Fletcher, "If she went into a bar like this, even hardened sailors would start running for the hills."

**"OPEN THE BLOODY DOOR!!!"**

Ginny's sword was cleaving through the air in a blur of steel, smashing against an invisible barrier that blocked the entrance to number four. Arthur knew some of the details of the spell Dumbledore had used and was amazed that Ginny was striking the shield with such force. Every strike was accompanied by a rain of sparks and the air actually rippled from the pressure she was exerting.

**"OPEN UP, DAMN YOU!!!"**

Obviously deciding that her sword was not making enough of an impression on the barrier, Ginny backed away several steps and switched from steel to wood. Arthur watching in amazement as she began hurling spell after spell at the front door of the house, all of them unbelievably powerful and some of the spells ones that Arthur had never heard of.

*'Great Maker,'* he thought as one of Ginny's curses actually managed to light up the entire protective ward that surrounded the house. *'When did she become so powerful?'*

"Miss Weasley," announced a calm and soothing voice, trying to catch Ginny's attention.

Everyone, except for Ginny who only continued her assault, turned to face the new arrivals that had Apparated in behind Arthur. It was Professor Dumbledore, accompanied by Professor McGonagall, Fleur Delacour and, to Arthur's surprise, Bill Weasley.

"Miss Weasley," repeated Dumbledore, stepping forward, "Please calm yourself."

Ginny whirled towards the old wizard, her teeth bared in a snarl that actually caused Fletcher and Perkins to step back in fright. Ginny literally growled at Dumbledore before snapping, "NO! Harry's trapped in there and I'm not going to wait any longer! Let me in!"

Dumbledore nodded benevolently, not in the least perturbed by Ginny's anger, "I understand fully, Virginia. However the protective wards surrounding the house are complex ones. This particular barrier spell only becomes active if Harry's life is seriously threatened. It prevents anyone from entering unless Harry or myself accompany them."

"Well that's bloody stupid!" screamed Ginny, waving her wand and sword about, "How in the name of hell are we supposed to help him if we can't get in?!" She turned back to the front door and resumed attacking it with her sword and wand, shouting out spells as she sliced with the blade.

"Arthur," acknowledged Dumbledore as Molly and Charlie ran up to them. Fred, George and Ron remained close to Ginny, watching her continue to assault the shield barrier. "I see Molly was able to contact you as well."

Arthur nodded and indicated the half dozen witches and wizards he had rounded up on such short notice, "I brought who I could."

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When Molly had frantically called his office only ten minutes earlier, Arthur had expected anything but what she had told him. Apparently, according to Ginny, Harry was in grave danger. Nobody really understood how Ginny knew this, but somehow she did.

While Molly and Charlie had been sceptical about this, Ron, Fred and George had not even paused to hesitate. After working her mother into a state of panic, Ginny had run up to her room and collected her wand and sword.

She had then, impossibly, Apparated to Privet Drive.

Arthur had scarcely been able to believe it when Molly told him this, especially as Ginny did *not* know how to Apparate. After hearing his wife's tale Arthur had told her to immediately contact Dumbledore, while he had gathered what help was available.

There was Jim Perkins, who worked with him in the department; Mundungus Fletcher, who had been visiting for some reason; Chrissy, a young Obliviator from the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad and a

couple of Unspeakables from the Department of Mysteries.

The last two, a pair of young women about Charlie's age, made Arthur slightly nervous. There was no denying that they were both quite beautiful, one with short red tresses and the other with long black locks. They were also talented, but unfortunately had a reputation for causing large amounts of collateral damage wherever they went.

"We're going to need more people," commented Chrissy, flicking a strand of her curly brown hair out of her face. Her brown eyes were surveying the scene and the large number of Muggles that had gathered outside to watch the spectacle, "Lots of witnesses. Your daughter's attracting a lot of attention, Mr Weasley."

Arthur sighed and nodded, acknowledging that Ginny would undoubtedly be in a great deal of trouble before this was over. At the moment though she really did not seem to care about anything beyond getting to Harry. If anything her attempts at entry, not to mention her screams, were growing in intensity.

**"GOD DAMN YOU!! OPEN!!"**

"Virginia," said Dumbledore, his voice rumbling with an ominous tone that would have stilled even the most rowdy of students back at Hogwarts.

Ginny rounded on Dumbledore again, her brown eyes bright and glistening with moisture, "Open this thrice accursed door NOW!!"

"Miss Weasley!" berated McGonagall, hands on her hips. This was accompanied by that fierce glare that could melt stone, but Ginny did not quail.

"Arthur, you, Minerva and Molly will accompany me into the house. The rest shall remain outside and see that we are not disturbed," declared Dumbledore. Ginny opened her mouth to protest, but the headmaster raised a hand to silence her, "You may come as well, Virginia. I doubt any of us could prevent you from doing otherwise."

With the quiet dignity and grace that was expected of him, Dumbledore led the way to the front door of number four Privet Drive and knocked politely. Arthur put his hand on Ginny's shoulder as she seethed impatiently at his side. She had, fortunately, sheathed her sword and handed it to Ron for safe keeping.

"Mr and Mrs Dursley?" asked Dumbledore, gently beginning to open the door. He had only opened it open a crack when Ginny pulled free of Arthur's grasp and pushed her way in.

Wondering just how he was going to apologise to Dumbledore later for Ginny's rudeness, Arthur followed his daughter and the headmaster inside. He immediately came to a surprised halt at the sight which greeted him.

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Vernon Dursley and his wife, Petunia, appeared to be housecleaning. Vernon held a large, sopping mop in his hands and was sweeping the floor with broad strokes. Petunia was down on her hands and knees with a large bucket of water by her side. She held a wet cloth was in her hands and was vigorously scrubbing at the floor.

With a squeak of alarm at the sudden intrusion, Vernon dropped the mop and stared at them in what Arthur recognised as horror. The blood drained out of the large man's face and he could not form any proper words for several seconds.

"Mr Dursley..." began Dumbledore in a calm voice, but was interrupted as Vernon flew into a rage that rivalled the display Ginny made outside. He began bellowing at the top of his lungs, his face flushed so red it was almost purple. His language quickly degenerated into colour cusses, but the general meaning remained much the same.

**"GET OUT OF MY HOUSE!!!"**

None of the witches and wizards present could say anything. By now Ron, Fred, George and the black haired Unspeakable had also entered the house. This added intrusion only seemed to add to Vernon's fury and he bent to retrieve his mop.

How he planned to evict properly trained wizards with such a simple object was beyond Arthur, but Vernon was obviously not thinking clearly. Just before the large man could reach the mop and take it up, the object skidded across the floor to come to rest under the heel of Ginny's left foot.

"Where is Harry?" she asked, her voice soft yet laced with a deadly intent that only an idiot would fail to notice.

Naturally Vernon continued to bellow, "Get out of my house!"

Ginny's arm jerked up in a sharp motion, instantly followed by a loud crack. Her wand was clearly not in her hand, yet she blew the belligerent Vernon Dursley across the room. The startled man smashed into the far wall and dropped to the floor with a loud crash. Ginny took another step forward and bellowed in a manner that Arthur found frighteningly reminiscent of Molly.

**"WHERE IS HARRY?!?"**

Accompanying Ginny's scream of rage the glass in every framed picture hanging in the entrance hall of Privet Drive shattered. It was not the intensity of her yell that broke the glass, but the wash of furious accidental magic that was rolling off Ginny in waves.

*'Oh dear,' thought Arthur, 'She's getting angry.'*

Of their own volition Vernon's eyes glanced towards the cupboard under the stairs, even though he still declined to speak. Seeing this subtle indicator Arthur felt his own blood begin to boil as he recalled some of the horror stories Ron had told him about the Dursleys.

Arthur was about to stride over to the cupboard and open it, but apparently Ginny had also seen Vernon's eye flick to one side. Unlike her father, however, Ginny did not bother using her hands to

open the cupboard.

With a crack of breaking wood the cupboard door was torn from its hinges and sent careening across the narrow room. The door smashed against the wall as the stairs leading up to the top floor began to splinter one after the other. The strength of Ginny's wandless magic was astounding and, Arthur realised, just a little terrifying.

Petunia Dursley has both crying and screaming at them, crouched over her fallen husband and trying to pull his bulky mass up. Hiding behind the two adults was their son, Dudley, who was clutching both hands protectively over his bottom.

"I'm going to kill them," breathed Ginny in a distracted tone. Her eyes were gazing vacantly at whatever sight lay hidden within the cupboard. Arthur could see the blood draining from her face as she dropped to her knees and reaching inside to pull Harry out into the open.

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Arthur's blood, which was close to boiling, immediately ran cold as he saw the prone body of the Boy Who Lived. Despite his loud enthusiasm about the Muggles, and their plugs, there were still aspects of Muggle culture and technology that Arthur simply did not understand, nor did he think he ever would. But he knew what a gun was.

And he could recognise the damage they inflicted on a body.

"I'll help," he snapped, turning his eyes to the Dursleys. His fingers gripping tightly around his wand as he glared daggers at the three Muggles. So that was why they had been so desperately trying to clean the floor.

They were trying to wash away the blood.

"Did you do this?" Dumbledore asked, his voice a hushed, barely audible, whisper.

Vernon sputtered about before attempting to make some sort of challenge against the professor. "Of course!" he snarled, sending Harry a vicious glare over Dumbledore's shoulder. "The boy's nothing but a complete waste! An abnormal freak like the rest of you! He should be thankful Petunia and I didn't drown him in a bucket the morning we found him!"

Dumbledore's face became livid and for an instant appeared truly terrifying. With a soft growl he leaned into Vernon's face, his twinkling blue eyes now as dark as a storm tossed sea. He glared down at Vernon with a look that could almost kill and an aura of great power gathered around him as he slowly drew his wand.

Vernon, pale as chalk, wet himself.

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Ginny had never felt so purely terrified in her life. Not even when Harry had so foolishly stepped in front of Avada Kedavra during the battle at Hogwarts. That had been different in so many ways. Harry had been down on the lawn, Ginny had been far away, high up on the Astronomy Tower.

And there had been very little blood.

Now there was a great deal of blood.

Pints of it. Everywhere. Harry's pale blue shirt was drenched in the dark red liquid, the blood oozing thickly from three places around his chest. The blood was matted in his hair and slowly trickled from his mouth and nose. His face was as pale as a porcelain doll and his lips were tinged blue, surrounded by red.

"Harry?" she asked, oblivious to everything around her save the boy whose head she lifted to cradle in her lap. She ignored the blood that immediately began to soak into her pleated skirt and gently shook his shoulder, "Harry?"

"But Hagrid," slurred Harry in a tired and almost childish voice. His eyes flickered open and looked blankly at her, "I can't play the piano."

Ginny blinked and then realized that he was probably delirious from blood loss and probably the shock as well. She ran a hand through his thick hair, ignoring the blood, "Harry? Don't worry, Harry, we're here."

He stared at her for several seconds, blinking slowly as a glimmer of recognition set in. His eyes shifted past her and he seemed to notice the others present. With a cough he turned his gaze back to Ginny.

"Get out."

"Oh, Harry, I'm so sorry," Ginny shook her head, waves of guilt suddenly washing over her. She had tried to tell him everything would be all right with the Dursleys. This entire mess was probably all her fault and now he hated her for it. "Don't make me go, I want to--"

Another cough wracked his body and he grimaced in pain, "Get out of the house. Now!"

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Her father knelt down beside them, reaching out to hold Harry's hand, "Harry--"

"Get her out of the house!" Harry yelled, blood spraying from his lips as his hand grabbed hold of her father's arm. A fit of coughs seized him and Harry convulsed where he lay.

"Listen Harry--" Mr Weasley tried to get Harry's attention and calm him down, but Harry resisted and interrupted once again, this time more vehemently than before.

"NOW! All of you, get out!"

Then Ginny felt Dumbledore's presence at her side and she looked up at the old wizard with pleading eyes, silently praying that he could reach Harry. "Harry--"

Again Harry interrupted, "All of you! Get-- Aaaargh!" Harry body spasmed and a hoarse yell of agony escaped his lips as he thrashed violently in Ginny's arms. She heard a loud crack and a gasp of pain from her father and realized that Harry had accidentally broken Arthur's arm.

*'God he's in so much pain. Why doesn't he want our help?'*

"Harry?" she asked tentatively after he had fallen still, his breathing ragged and his eyes shut against the pain he was obviously feeling.

"Please... get out..." Harry begged, opening his eyes and looking imploringly at her, "get away... You're not safe here."

Dumbledore crouched down beside her and Harry, placing a gently hand on Ginny's shoulder as he leaned forward. Her father had pulled free of Harry's crushing grip and was being seen to by her mother, as Dumbledore asked, "Harry, what's happening?"

Blood was dribbling from Harry's mouth and nose as he tried to speak. Unfortunately either the pain or the blood loss was preventing him for speaking clearly. All he could manage were gasped sentences between choking coughs of more blood.

"Can't stop it. Inside of me. It wants to break out. It's going to break out," Harry shook his head weakly. Ginny could feel his body tensing as she held him and his white, gold and red aura was fluctuating wildly, "Can't stop it. It'll get loose. So powerful. Savage. Mindless. Raw. Can't. Stop. It." "Can't stop what?" asked Ron, kneeling at Harry's feet.

Harry arched his back and a scream tore from his throat as waves of energy radiated out from him, knocking everyone back. **"I DON'T KNOW!!"** he cried as the outburst slowly abated and he cried out in further pain. He glared at them, his eyes glowing with barely restrained power, "Get out!"

*'No, I'm not leaving you here alone.'*

Dumbledore considered for a moment and then nodded sharply. Her parents, McGonagall and the woman from the Department of Mysteries immediately vacated the premises, grabbing the cowering forms of the Dursleys as they went.

"Go! Go now! Leave me!"

The light from Harry's aura was now so bright that it had become visible to everyone watching and not just Ginny. Dumbledore took hold of Ginny's shoulder and tried to pull her up, but she refused to be separated from Harry.

"Dammit! Go!" shouted Harry, furiously, motioning at the others. Ginny tried to protest, but Ron, Fred, George and Dumbledore took firm grips and dragged her away. She struggled and fought tooth and nail, but it was no use.

As they hurried out the door and down the front garden to the street where the others were waiting, Ginny heard Harry cry out one more time.

**"GO!"**

And with a primal shriek of release that could be heard from one end of Little Whinging to the other, Harry Potter, and number four Privet Drive, ceased to exist.

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## 26. Change of Address

A blind white light encompassed Privet Drive. It was joined by a muted rush, like the whispered growl of a hurricane. A concussion wave of air exploded outwards and lifted Ron off his feet and into the air. Normally the novelty of flying without the aid of a broom would have caught the youngest Weasley male's attention. However being sent hurtling through the air by a blast of raw magical energy tends to distract one from such novelties.

Ron's brief attempt at broomless flight came to an abrupt end an instant later as he was slammed into the road with a painful crunch. The metallic taste of blood filled his mouth as his teeth bit down hard on his tongue, accompanied by a sharp pain in his chest that signalled the breaking of one or two ribs.

*'At least we got out of the house,'* he thought as he rolled over to survey the damage. His eyes were watering and he had trouble focusing on what lay before him, but he was able to get a good idea of what had just happened.

One thing was immediately obvious.

Number four Privet Drive... was gone.

Ron blinked his eyes rapidly in an attempt to clear them, spitting out the blood that had pooled in his bleeding mouth. Groaning from the ache in his chest, Ron pushed himself into a sitting position and found himself gaping at the carnage spread out before him.

Harry's house, or rather the Dursley's house, had been completely destroyed. There was no other way to put it. There was nothing left of it. It was simply gone. Clouds of smoke and dust obscured the view, but Ron could make out a massive, steaming hole in the earth where number four had once stood.

*'Merciful heavens...'*

The buildings to either side, number two and number six, had also suffered damage, but it appeared to be mostly cosmetic in nature. The paint on the walls facing where number four had been was scorched and blacken, while the windows on those sides had been blown in.

Several street lamps lining the roadside had also felt the brunt of the explosion and had been knocked skew of their upright positions. The poles were bent at crooked angles and the lights were out, broken from the impact. Even the road had been affected, torn up and cracked in large pieces. It looked like some pictures Ron had seen of the damage an earthquake left in its wake, only this had not been an earthquake.

*'Harry did this,'* he thought in shock, turning his attention back to where number four had been.

Ron had spent the duration of the battle for Hogwarts in the Practical Fighting Techniques auditorium, coordinating the defence with the help of the situation map. Safely ensconced beneath the castle he had not had an opportunity to see Harry's magic firsthand. He had do make do with stories from those

*'I never realized...'*

At first Ron assumed that it must have been Harry, since everyone else had rushed out of the house, leaving only Harry within its walls. True, he had been forced to drag his sister kicking and screaming, but they had all cleared away in time. But as the view cleared Ron quickly realised that if it was anything, it was not Harry.

Whatever it was, it was big. Very big. Easily as big as a dragon. No. Bigger. Much bigger. On their hind legs a dragon could stand sixty feet tall. This beast was nearly that high already while standing in a low crouch. With a jerk and a twitch, accompanied by a deep and ominous growl like an avalanche, it began to move and slowly stood up.

And up.

It was like staring into the heart of the sun.

It stood just shy of a hundred feet tall, higher if you included the arching curves of its wings that rose from its back. The creature, which Charlie realized was actually Harry, deftly unfurled its wings, spreading them wide to either side of its bulk.

Reaching out behind him were the glorious, feathered wings of an eagle that spanned over a hundred feet from tip to tip. The feathers were the same pure white as the fur covering his body and were tipped in gleaming gold. These razor-sharp golden tips caught and reflected all the light that reached them, glowing like miniature suns along the edges of his wings.

Its cat-like eyes, each the size of a Muggle beach ball, were glowing with inner strength. They were the same startling green that Harry possessed in his human form, only so much greater and burning with a primal fire. It was so obvious now, the blend of feline and eagle, there could be not doubt as to what Harry's Animagus form was.

*'Although Merlin only knows what kind...'*

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//RRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHAAAAAAAHHHHHH
HH!!!!//
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Ten miles away, little children woke up crying and every living creature, great and small, within fifty miles of where number four Privet Drive had once stood, heard the Griffin's call.

It was a cry of exultation and of long awaited release. A message to the world that something new, something ancient had returned from beyond and was now free.

The Griffin continued to howl for over a minute, his head thrown back and muscular arms spread wide as though in supplication to the heavens. Finally, when Charlie was beginning to wonder if it would ever end, the cry trailed off and the Griffin lowered his head. Focusing on the tiny people standing, or lying scattered before him, the Griffin gave a low, rumbling growl.

"Now that it one large beastie," commented a rasping voice at Charlie's side, after several moments of quiet had passed. Charlie started, surprised by the unexpected presence of none other than Alastor 'May-Eye' Moody standing beside him.

Charlie looked at her and then back to the Griffin and shrugged, "Big lungs."

Nobody, not even the Muggles, could bring themselves to move as the Griffin dropped its upright stance as though preparing to pounce. As it held itself steadfast in the smouldering crater that surrounded it, Charlie watched with mounting apprehension as its glowing green eyes scanned back

*It's looking for something,'* he realized with a start. Then the Griffin's gaze fell on three trembling figures that were huddled close together on the far side of the street opposite it. Charlie looked in that direction and suddenly came to the conclusion that all hell was about to break loose in Privet Drive.

Minerva McGonagall and Charlie's parents seemed to be standing guard over them, though none of the three were trying to comfort or calm the distressed Muggles. The man was looking at the ruins of his home with a pasty face as he clutched his wailing wife to his chest. The boy, who was large enough to rival the Griffin, was bleating and making noises that sounded more akin to a farm animal than a human.

Charlie turned away from the Dursleys and noticed the large numbers of witches and wizards that had Apparated into the area. Where originally there had been about a dozen, including the Weasley family, now there were close to fifty of them. Aurors and Obliviators comprised the bulk of them, clearly sent by the Ministry to try contain the situation.

The deep, threatening growl drew Charlie's attention back to the Griffin. The creature's eyes were firmly fixed upon the cowering Dursleys and had narrowed to fine slits that failed to hide the burning green fire that blazed within them.

Charlie relaxed as his little sister, Ginny, made her way to stand before the towering behemoth that seemed only a hairsbreadth away from becoming a rampaging behemoth. From the few letters Ginny had written to him over the past year, Charlie was willing to believe that if anyone could reach Harry, it was her.

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//RRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAWXXXXXXXXXXXXRRR  
RRRR!!!!//
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As the Griffin bared its fangs in a snarl and presented its talons in challenge, Dumbledore made his presence known. The old wizard strode down the cracked and upturned length of road to stand where Ginny had fallen. He peered over the rims of his broken spectacles at the Griffin that loomed menacingly over them all.

The Griffin stumbled back a step, the ground trembling as its massive weight shifted. For a short second or two it seemed to be off balance, but quickly steadied itself. The Griffin's wings spread wide and helped it to remain upright. It dug its feet into the ground and shifted its stance to distribute its weight more evenly.

Charlie drew his own wand and ran unsteadily to help Ginny to her feet. As he drew close he caught the look of absolute astonishment on Dumbledore's face as the Griffin flexed its shoulders and flapped its wings, once, twice. Clouds of dust were kicked up from the movement and Charlie had to squint against the buffeting wind.

Close to fifty Stunners shot through the air in the blink of an eye, all bearing straight at the snarling Griffin. So much force and power in a single instant would have knocked a Hungarian Horntail unconscious and to the ground like a felled oak tree.

The Griffin met the multitude of spells without flinching, like a trained boxer rolling against a light jab. The only indication that they had hit it at all was the way its shoulders twitched and the howl of

unadulterated fury that followed. It might have been Charlie's imagination but it seemed to him as if the Griffin's fur and feathers were beginning to glow even brighter.

"Conjunctivitis!" cried two female voices, which Charlie recognized as the two Unspeakables his father had dragged along.

This time the Griffin reacted even more fiercely as the curses struck it in the eyes with a flare of white light. A shriek that caused his already overtaxed ears to protest rang out and was followed almost immediately by a resounding crash. The Griffin had swung around blindly and one of its unfurled wings had collided with number two Privet Drive.

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Broken bricks, pieces of wood and shards of tile fell to the ground as the Griffin spun full circle and back to face them. Its glowing eyes, now almost too bright to look directly at, were fixed on the two Unspeakables with open malice. The young women both voiced a sound that seemed more fitting of a mouse than trained witches, but under the fury of such a gaze...

The Griffin took two menacing steps forward, the ground shaking and rumbling as each foot rose and fell. Its taloned claws were flexing in something that could have been anticipation and its lips were bared in a silent snarl.

"I'm sorry, Harry," came a soft voice. Had Charlie not been standing only three feet away, he would never have heard Ginny's quiet apology for what she was about to do. It took him a second to realize that her wand was drawn and aimed with a trembling arm at the advancing Griffin.

"Stupefy."

Charlie would never have believed that so much power could be placed into a single spell by only one person. Especially his baby sister. It was simply not something he thought possible when it came to Ginny. He knew her magic was above average, he had seen examples of it when they were both younger, but if this was any indication; she was stronger than Dumbledore.

The Griffin was actually lifted off its feet and into the air. If it was possible Charlie would have described the look on its face as that of acute surprise. After a moment of airborne flight the massive creature fell to the earth with what would have undoubtedly been a thunderous crash. Its fall was broken, however, by number six Privet Drive.

With arms, legs and wings flaying about the Griffin collided with the side of the house. And continued to fall, the walls mounting hardly any resistance against its mass. Tiles, bricks and wood collapsed all around the Griffin as it smashed through the top floor and down into the floor below. A billowing cloud of dust and fine debris exploded outwards as the hulking beast hit the ground with a crash that made Charlie's teeth click.

Several minutes passed in relative silence, apart from the clattering noise of falling masonry. Finally the clouds of dust began to settle down and revealing to everyone that had not yet run off screaming the fate of the house next door to the Dursleys. Suffice to say that Privet Drive was now missing two houses instead of just the one.

"Glory be," muttered Mundungus Fletcher, gawking at the scene of destruction with wide eyes.

"Please let him be all right," whispered Ginny, so softly that Charlie could barely hear her. Without even thinking about it he shifted closer to her and wrapped a comforting arm around her shoulders as he surveyed the wreckage.

Then, to everyone's disbelief, the rubble began to stir.

\*\*\*

//...mmmmmmMMMMMMGGGGGGGGRRRRRRRRRRRAAAAAAAHHHHH!!!!//

Bill Weasley shielded his eyes behind his hand as the Griffin tore free from the ruins of number six Privet Drive. He had noted earlier that the Animagus had been growing brighter and brighter at a steady rate. Their attacks against the Griffin had only served to agitate the beast and cause the white glow to increase in intensity.

Now it was impossible to look at.

The Griffin's birth cry, which was what Bill compared it to, had shattered every Muggle light bulb in the town. Thus the entire street had been plunged into relative darkness under the gloom of the evening dusk as the sun set. Now, however, as the Griffin pulled loose from the debris that had fallen on top of it, the street was bathed in light.

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With his eyes almost completely shut and hidden behind his outstretch hand, Bill could only just make out the gigantic form of the Griffin. It was struggling to its feet, swaying unsteadily as it rose up high above them. With each step accompanied by a loud thump and quake, it lurched forward and collapsed into the crater that it had appeared in.

//HHHHHRRRRRGGGGG...//

It seemed impossible but the light surrounding and emanating from the Griffin appeared to be growing even stronger. Bill could clearly see the outline of the bones inside the hand shading his eyes against the glare.

//HHHHHRRRRRGGGGG...//

It may have seemed impossible, but it was true. With each throaty growl the intensity of the glow that was engulfing the Griffin increased. It might have been his imagination but Bill could have sworn he could feel the tickle of raw power running up his spine.

//HHHHHRRRRRGGGGG...//

It was so bright now that nobody could even face in that direction. Bill, along with everyone else, had turned his back away from the blinding light. It was incredible, the light was stark yet appeared to pulsate as it illuminated the world around them. It was so bright that even their shadows seemed to

fade away under its glare.

//-----//

The darkness was so sudden that Bill could not prevent the yelp of surprise he uttered. A thousand questions popped into his head in that instant, as the light simply disappeared and left them all in what felt like complete blackness.

Bill never got a chance to ask any of his thousand questions.

It rushed out and fell upon them like a wave breaking against the shore. Unlike the blinding brilliance that had encompassed the Griffin, this was softer, gentler. The glow of energy was a soothing mix of light blues and greens that swept out behind a sound like pixies giggling.

Bill opened his eyes, after having closed them in anticipation of something dreadful, and found himself face with the absolutely last thing he had expected. The titanic form of Harry's Animagus was gone, disappeared without a trace and everything was back to exactly the way it had been before.

'Well, nearly.'

The Muggle cars that had been flipped over and battered by the initial explosion were once again in perfect condition. Their metal frames were pristine and smoothly precise, the paint gleaming with a polished finish.

All that was wrong was that they were all still either on their sides or completely upside down.

Privet Drive itself had been repaired and the road appeared almost freshly laid. It was perfectly flat and rolling, with the customary white and yellow lines looking as if they only just been painted on. The street lamps that had been knocked askew now stood tall and straight, their light bulbs glowing a soft white that illuminated the street.

All that was wrong were the crowds of dumbstruck witches, wizards and Muggles scattered about.

The gaping hole that the Griffin's wing had torn into the side of number two Privet Drive was repaired. If Bill had not seen the damage done before his own eyes he would never have known that an entire wall had been knocked out with almost casual ease. The bricks had been returned to their proper places, the few tiles that had been knocked away were back on the roof and the shattered windows were shining.

All that was wrong was that the paint adorning the repairs was clearly newer and brighter.

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The demolished ruins of number six Privet Drive had seemingly been completely rebuilt from the ground up. The entire house seemed to be newly constructed. The paint on the walls was brighter and cleaner than the others and its tiles were not yet faded from sun and rain. The garden was perfect in every way and the brass number six on the front door gleamed in the lamp light.

All that was wrong was the gap between it and its neighbour.

Everything had been returned to how it had been before, perhaps even better, with a single exception.

There at the start of the street was number two, then a space, and then number six.

Number four Privet Drive... was still gone.

That plot of land was completely empty. The once neatly mowed grass and trimmed shrubs had been burned away, leaving nothing but barren earth. The bricked driveway was gone, save for a few bricks that lay near the road. And there, in the centre of this vacant lot, was a hole in the ground. It filled up most of the space and was nearly fifteen feet deep at its centre, where the only two things that had survived number four's destruction lay.

A large, old and battered trunk with the initials 'HP' engraved on the front.

A completely naked fifteen, nearly sixteen, year-old unconscious boy.

Harry Potter.

\*\*\*

Ginny was the first one to reach him, having almost killed someone who had unfortunately been in her way. The poor Auror had tumbled down the slope of the crater and finished his uncontrolled descent with a rough landing and solid encounter against Harry's trunk.

The contents of the trunk were now scattered about the immediate area as the bruised man painfully pulled himself up. Ginny ignored both him and the mess as she hurried to Harry and knelt down beside him.

"Harry?"

With a small amount of trepidation Ginny reached out a hand and rolled Harry onto his back, shutting her eyes as she did. A moment passed and then she cracked her left eye open and then her right as both grew wide with relief and amazement.

The three bullet wounds that had been almost fountaining blood not fifteen minutes ago had completely vanished. Aside from some slight redness there was not a trace of the life threatening injuries that Harry had sustained at the hands of his 'family'.

"Thank Merlin he's going to be okay," she breathed once her relief subsided enough for her rational processes to reactivate.

*\*Don't thank me now,\** a voice seemed to tell her, *\*He's not out of the woods just yet.\**

Ignoring the strange sensation Ginny focused her attention wholly on Harry. She scarcely noticed as other witches and wizards descended into the crater and clustered around them. Ginny's quick, yet thorough, examination of Harry revealed nothing in the way of injury, beyond one or two small bruises that must have been sustained during his transformation back to his human form.

Ginny was so relieved that Harry was no longer at death's door that she didn't even realize that he was completely without clothing. This point was only driven home when her father, cradling his broken arm against his side, draped his robe over Harry's limp body.

*\*Our little Harry,\** announced a slightly bemused voice, *\*An Imperial Arch Griffin.\**

*\*Who would have guessed?\** noted another voice, a woman this time.

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Ginny frowned and looked around at the people crowded into the spot that had once been occupied by number four Privet Drive. She could swear that people were talking, yet she could not place where the voices were coming from. Everyone was talking in low murmurs and whispers, except for these voices that sounded almost as if they were coming from right behind her.

*\*I think she's beginning to catch on,\** observed a wry male, whose accent Ginny could not place, but reminded her of some of the people she had heard during her visit to Egypt.

*\*Hush, Osiris,\** admashed a similar sounding female voice, *\*Now is not the time to joke.\**

Ginny looked around again, trying to be surreptitious about it and not draw attention to her doing so. Besides she was also preoccupied with Harry, whose head she had lifted and brought to rest on her lap.

*'Who the hell is saying all that?'*

*\*...\**

*'I'm not hearing things, am I?'*

*\*Better sit down, Virginia. Explaining this is going to take some time.\**

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## 27. Behind Closed Doors

Ron was engaged in a fierce argument with Fred and George when Professor Dumbledore arrived at the Burrow. It had been three days since the end of school and the disturbing incidents that had played out at what was once number four Privet Drive.

The crux of Ron's argument revolved around Harry, who was now residing in Ron's bed while Ron doubled up in Percy's room. Since returning to his human form, after having vaporised the Dursleys' house, Harry had been in a shock-induced coma.

After an initial assessment by Madam Pomfrey at the Auror headquarters in the Ministry, Harry had been brought to the Burrow at Arthur and Molly Weasley's insistence. The idea was that being in familiar surroundings and the company of people he considered friends and family would speed Harry's recovery.

*'At least that's the working assumption.'*

Fred and George, however, were pushing for having Harry transferred to their room instead of Ron's. They argued that the vibrant (glaring, actually) orange that suffused Ron's room would have a detrimental effect on Harry's condition.

Ron's counterargument was that Harry was in a coma and could care less about the colour of the room he was staying in, as his eyes were shut.

The twins responded with the belief that upon waking Harry would take one look at the bright orange walls surrounding him and promptly go back to sleep.

"Honestly! How can you two be so flippant at a time like this?" exclaimed Hermione as they joined the adults at the dining table. She had Flooed to the Burrow only minutes after receiving Ron's letter about Harry's condition. Ron had been pleased to hear that she had told her parents, in no uncertain terms, that she would remain at the Burrow until Harry recovered.

Both boys' smiles dimmed a fraction before George answered in all seriousness, "We have to do something. If we just sat around twiddling our thumbs and worrying; we'd go crazy."

Ron looked at them and smirked, "Too late."

"It is important to try keep in good spirits during times like these," observed Dumbledore, sipping the tea Molly had drawn for him.

"Hopefully Harry will be up and about in a few days," said Bill, trying to be positive about the situation. He smiled and reached for a biscuit, "If he can survive You-Know-Who I don't think a crazy Muggle with a gam would be that much of a challenge."

"Gun, not gam," corrected Hermione, absently, accepting a cup of tea from Molly as the four teenagers took their seats at the table.

Ron felt proud of his success in stopping himself from rolling his eyes. *'That's my Mione; worried about our grammar or whatnot, even at a time like this.'*

Charlie, who had just finishing a biscuit, turned to Dumbledore. He managed to open his mouth to speak, but did not manage to get a word out as the back door swung open. Everyone turned to look as Ginny slunk back into the house from the garden.

The youngest Weasley, and the only girl, had a terse expression on her face as she walked through the kitchen. Her hair fell to her shoulders in an uncombed tangle and her clothes were wrinkled from having been slept in.

"Ginny, why are you still wearing yesterday's clothes?" asked Molly Weasley, her eyebrows arched up in a faint scowl of disapproval.

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"I forgot to change," replied Ginny, passing from the kitchen and into the dining room without breaking stride. Her voice had a sullen and tired ring to it, devoid of the life and energy that normally bubbled within her.

Without another word she exited the room and trekked up the stairs, clearly heading to Ron's room and Harry. She had hardly left his side since the incident at Privet Drive and it had even reached the point where Hermione, who had spent the last two nights at the Burrow, had yet to sleep in Ginny's room with Ginny actually present.

*'She really does love him,'* Ron thought as he glanced at Hermione to share a worried look, both for

Harry and his sister.

*'No wonder she seems so distracted.'*

\*\*\*

Ginny stood in the doorway to Ron's room, currently occupied by Harry, and wondered just when she had lost hold of her sanity.

Ron's room was as it had always been, every surface covered in violent orange posters and pennants. The Chudley Cannons, ninth in the league, zoomed here and there in their equally bright orange robes. "Hello, Hedwig," she greeted as she stepped into the room. The snowy owl had arrived at Privet Drive shortly after its destruction and had been redirected by Ron to the Burrow. Now she sat perched on the headboard of Ron's bed, maintaining a silent vigil over Harry.

Hedwig hooted softly and turned her amber eyes to Ginny as the girl closed and locked the door. The owl's eyes seemed almost mournful as she watched Ginny walk up to the bed. After permitting a quick ruffling of her feathers, Hedwig turned her sombre gaze back to Harry.

Ginny looked down at the boy she loved and reached out a hand to lightly stroke his cheek. It had been three days and he had yet to wake or move. Madam Pomfrey was staunch in her assertion that Harry would be coming to in a matter of days, but Ginny had reason to doubt.

Several, highly vocal, reasons actually.

*'He looks so pale,'* she thought as she gently sat down beside him, run a hand through his unruly hair.

Harry's body was completely free of any injury, even Madam Pomfrey could not find anything wrong with him, but the magic used to accomplish this had been highly unstable.

Shaking herself free of her musings, Ginny stood and double checked the intricate Locking Spell she had cast on the door. For what she had planning, Ginny did *not* want to be interrupted. If anyone did happen upon her during this crazy venture she was certain she would die of embarrassment.

"Explain to me again why I have to do this naked?" she asked in a whisper. Even as she spoke she began unbuttoning her blouse.

Receiving no reply, although she could have sworn she heard a snicker, Ginny pulled off her blouse and folded it neatly. Placing the clothing on Ron's dresser she then removed her skirt and folded it as well before placing it next to her discarded shirt.

Feeling oddly reluctant, even if Harry was blissfully unaware of her presence, Ginny pulled back the orange bed sheets. Chewing nervously on her bottom lip she proceeded to divest her boyfriend of his rumpled pyjamas. Removing her underwear, the last of her clothes, she hopped into the bed next to Harry and pulled the covers back up.

It was truly remarkable, a piece of her mind noted, how uncomfortable she was with all this. After their dinner at the Ragnarok, and on several occasions since then, she and Harry had engaged in relatively intimate explorations of each other's bodies.

Of course, Harry had been willing, not to mention awake, during those encounters. Now it felt almost like a violation of his trust in her, doing something like this without his consent or awareness.

Besides which her parents, brothers *and* Professor Dumbledore were downstairs.

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"I must be out of my mind," she muttered as she pressed against Harry, resting her head on the slope of his bare chest.

***\*Don't worry,\**** assured a voice, ***\*Soon you'll be in a new one.\****

\*\*\*

Ginny blinked.

*'This is not what I was expecting.'*

Ginny blinked again.

*'Harry sure as heck never mentioned anything like this.'*

Ginny blinked yet again.

*'Nor for that matter did any of the voices.'*

***\*Well you can't blame us for having a little fun now, can you?\****

Startled Ginny spun around, coming face to face with a young man standing only a few feet away from her. She narrowed her eyes as she looked him over with a cautious and appraising gaze. He was fairly tall, about the same as Harry was, and same slender, yet toned, physique. His light brown hair fell to just above his shoulders and his cobalt coloured eyes sparkled merrily.

With a sudden bout of apprehension Ginny glanced down and was relieved to discover that while she had stripped naked in Ron's room; here she was fortunately enough not naked. The blue skirt and green blouse she had been wearing in the real world had somehow managed to find their way back onto her body her in this realm of thought and mind.

"Do I know you?" she asked after a moment, "You look familiar but I can't..."

***\*My name, dear girl,"*** he said, his lips twisting into an amused smile, ***"is Merlin.\****

Ginny found herself unable to do anything save blink. Her mouth opened and closed several times before she managed to stutter, "You don't... I mean... you look..."

Merlin shrugged amiably, "Unfortunately the magical community tends to only publish pictures or paintings of me as I appeared during my second century of life. Here, in the Grand Hall of the Phoenix, I can appear however I wish."

Reaching out his hand Merlin lead her further into her magnificent surroundings. The Grand Hall was beyond anything Harry had described to her. The walls shimmered and glowed in vibrant reds and gold, with soft white light surrounding everything. Columns of undulating energy stretched up from the white marble floor to the distant ceiling, which was lost in a haze.

"When are we going to get Harry back?" Ginny asked, forcing her attention away from the splendour of the hall. All this was undeniably impressive, but Ginny's only concern was for Harry, not metaphysical architecture.

"Impatient, aren't we?" asked Merlin with a benevolent smile that reminded her of Dumbledore.

Ginny scowled and shook her head, "I have priorities and Harry's top of the list. Everything else is unimportant."

A voice spoke up from one side of them, "Even then, there's no reason for you to rush so. Time is highly subjective here. You could spend a month with us, within these halls, and scarcely an hour would pass in the waking world."

"Who the blazes are you?" Ginny turned to face the newcomer. It was another man, also young in appearance. His long black hair was drawn into a ponytail and his dark complexion was matched by the deep burgundy and gold robes he was wearing.

"I am Quetzalcoatl," he replied, indicating to one side as he spoke, "And these are the other members of the Order. Or at least, the other active members."

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Somewhere between a dozen or two people seemed to emerge from the sides of the seemingly endless hall, a mixture of men and women from widely varied cultures. Ginny only recognised one of them, a man she knew to be Alexander the Great, one of the few famous wizards that was also known to the Muggles.

"What do you mean active?" she asked, watching the others curiously.

"We are not real people," explained one woman, whose dusky skin tone, black hair and accent led Ginny to recognise her as Isis, one of the voices she had heard before. Isis walked over to where Ginny, Merlin and Quetzalcoatl were standing. "We are simply echoes of past holders of the Order's power, echoes that will eventually fade away."

A short, wiry man with a horned helmet and gold beard stepped forward, "Of course not all of us held the Order. Some of us are merely 'echoes' of people that were frequently in the company of those that did. Eventually your brother Ron, and that know-it-all Hermione, will leave their own echoes here, along with Harry's and your own."

"Thank you for stating the blindingly obvious yet again, Loki," drawled an exceptionally tall and muscular man.

"My pleasure, Heracles," replied Loki, executing a mocking bow as he spoke.

A young blonde haired woman dressed in a chain mail suit of armour sighed, "E was being sarcastic, you Nordic oaf. 'Onestly."

Ginny turned to Merlin with raised eyebrows, "You people are weird."

"No, We're just eccentric," replied an Egyptian man standing beside Isis.

"Fine. You're eccentric then."

Loki seemed proud of this and declared in a loud and boisterous voice, "Of course we are! We're dead! What's your excuse?"

Ginny rolled her eyes, wondering how Harry had managed to retain his sanity with such a bunch of... interesting individuals constantly bothering him. She arched an eyebrow at the diminutive Norseman and told him, "I am not eccentric."

"That's a matter of opinion, Gin."

"Harry?" Ginny turned on her heel so rapidly she lost her balance and almost fell flat on her face.

Strong arms reached out just in time to catch her and hold her steady. With surprise emblazoned on her face, Ginny looked up at the smirking face of Harry Potter.

For a moment she simply stood there in his tender grasp, wondering if this task she had spent the past three days readying herself for had truly been this easy. Frowning in confusion Ginny looked over her shoulder as Harry released her and looked quizzically at Merlin, "Wait a minute, I thought you said Harry was missing!"

"He is!" asserted Merlin, as if Harry wasn't standing right in front of her.

"I am!" agreed Harry, thoroughly confusing the poor girl.

Ginny shook her head in an attempt to clear her thoughts. Unsuccessful in this she rubbed her fingers against the bridge of her nose, feeling that the explanation she was about to hear would no doubt bring about the onset of a headache. Taking a deep breath she rounded on Merlin, who was grinning broadly and stated directly, "Explain. Now."

Merlin's grin broadened and he chuckled before answering, "This is Harry, however he is not the Harry you need to find."

A tall and slender Asian man, with a carefully cultivated moustache and goatee nodded his agreement with Merlin's words. "Harry has been merged with the Order for nearly a year now. His mind has begun to insinuate itself into the Order's being, just as ours once did. Just as yours is doing so, now that you are fully with us."

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"So..." Ginny turned back to an abashed looking Harry, "you're not real?"

"Of course I'm real. I'm here aren't I? Even if I am only an imprint," responded Harry with a small amount of playful indignation. After a moment of playing it up he abruptly turned serious and waved his humour aside, "Still, that's all neither here nor there. Then again... neither am I right now."

The elegantly robed Asian folded his hands, "So... you begin to see our problem, hmm?"

Ginny looked closely at Harry's duplicate, "But Harry's still alive. So how can you be here?"

"Normally Harry's presence would drown me out," explained the shade, "Since I am technically a part

of Harry, if he were conscious I would not exist.\*

\*Unfortunately Harry is lost to us,\* admitted Osiris, \*His body still lives, but his mind is on the cusp of death. He is imprisoned within himself and unless you can free him...\*

She shook her head in frustration, "I don't understand. I know that his uncle shot him and he was badly hurt and his Animagus transformation must have been a strain, but what's the problem? Why is he in so much danger?"

It was a pair of identical twins that answered. They were dressed in crude looking togas, one lined with red and the other with blue. First to speak was the red twin, \*As you just said, the Animagus transformation was a great strain on Harry. Not just his body but his mind.\*

\*You see,\* continued the blue twin, \*Harry is an Imperial Arch Griffin. Such creatures were rare even before they became extinct, millennia ago. The sheer size, not to mention its magical nature, was causing an obstruction within Harry.\*

"Are you saying Harry is brain damaged?" asked Ginny, silently terrified. Madam Pomfrey's examination had given Harry a clear bill of health, but if anyone truly knew Harry's condition it was the Order of the Phoenix.

\*No. What Romulus is saying,\* picked up Remus, \*is that when Harry transformed he was unable to effect any *control* over the process.\*

A diminutive, but pretty looking Asian girl nodded in agreement, \*The part of Harry that equates to his Animagus form, with beast within him, took over. That is why Harry has been unable to awaken - the animal side of his mind is in control.\*

Heracles harrumphed and looked from Ginny to the kimono-clad girl and back, \*What Miko is trying to get across is that all that is left of Harry right now is pure instinct. To fight, flee and... er... um... ahem.\*

\*Chase the wenches!\* finished Loki succinctly.

\*Precisely,\* agreed the Greek demigod, looking both relieved that he did not have to finish the sentence himself, and annoyed at the Norseman's bluntness.

Ginny turned to Merlin. Even though he was not the oldest of those assembled, she felt a kinship with him that reminded her greatly of Professor Dumbledore. "But why haven't you helped him?"

Merlin sighed and indicated a distant door that she had not noticed before, \*Can you imagine having to constantly share your mind, your existence, with a multitude of other people. People who are not even truly alive? It would drive you insane.\*

"So... you can't enter Harry's mind," said Ginny as the realization dawned upon her. She looked at the door and noticed that, despite its out of place plainness compared to the rest of the Grand Hall, it was somehow separate from everything surrounding it. Somehow she understood the symbolism of it.

A door that led the way into Harry's mind.

\*We *can* enter Harry's mind,\* corrected Alexander, \*But only when Harry grants us entrance. Since he is otherwise... occupied... we are unable to help him. You on the other hand...\*

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"You want *me* to go into Harry's mind and rescue him?" Ginny asked, managing to sound incredulous even though she had seen this coming.

The assorted members of the Order, men and women, exchanged unreadable glances and then turned en-mass to face her and chorus, \*Surprise?\*

Ginny arched an eyebrow imperiously, "I don't like surprises."

\*Don't worry, there won't be any more,\* assured Remus, grinning broadly and motioning Ginny towards the door.

"In my experience, there always are," Ginny replied in a wry tone of voice. Without so much as a blink she gripped the doorknob and swung the door wide open, stepping quickly across the threshold. There was a white moment of timeless nothing and then Ginny found herself stumbling forward onto solid ground.

With a surprised expression on her face Ginny looked around her, feeling her eyes widening as she took in the view. Standing upon a slightly elevated grassy bluff Ginny slowly turned in a circle and gaped at her surroundings. She had never expected that Harry's mind would prove so... so... wondrous.

"So, what happens now?"

\***Damned if I know,**\* she could sense Merlin's shrug, \***We're making this up as we go along.**\*

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## 28. Dominant Instinct

Ginny had recently made a resolution that, regardless of what happened, when next she saw Merlin or any of the other members of the Order of the Phoenix, she was going to kick their arses all the way from the Burrow to Hogwarts.

"My feet are killing me," she groaned as she trudged along. "Who would've thought Harry's mind could be so damn big?"

\***Indeed?**\* asked Merlin, his voice sounding vaguely amused.

Ginny glowered. "Yes. Indeed. For Merlin's sake, I've been running around this menagerie for what seems like days!"

There was tired and almost disgruntled sounding sigh. \***As we told you; time here is highly subjective. In reality only a few minutes have passed, perhaps not even that long. And will you please stop that?**\*

"Stop what?"

\***Merlin's sake. Sweet Merlin. Great Merlin. Merlin's beard. Holy Merlin. That!**\*

"Touchy subject, eh?" asked Ginny impishly, noting as she did that she was drawing close to another forest. Without hesitating she veered to one side, making certain that she would pass a fair distance from the woods.

During her time in Harry's mindscape, which was a magnificent and magical realm, Ginny had only once approached one of the few forests. At first, from a distance, it had seemed almost as wondrous as the rest of Harry's world. But as she'd come closer, the forest had become clearer and at the same time darker in appearance.

It had reminded her frighteningly of the Forbidden Forest by Hogwarts, and Ginny had been afraid to risk entering it. The chilling screams and cries echoing from within the trees had done nothing to ease her apprehension. Some of the howls she had recognised as the voices of the Dursleys, constantly berating and demeaning whomever they were directed to.

*They were his memories, she recalled, of how the Dursleys used to treat him.*

Since then she had steered well clear of these places, focusing her search for Harry across the rolling emerald hills and crystalline lakes. As she trekked through the fields of ankle-deep grass, Ginny turned her gaze upwards, searching the sky above for any hint of approaching night.

The sky was a bright and clear blue, occasionally spotted with white, fluffy-looking clouds. Every so often, but at irregular intervals, the sky would darken to a deep indigo, with streaks of violet and orange radiating from the never setting sun. It would dip low towards the horizon, but never truly disappeared from view.

There were buildings as well, although Ginny had not been able to explore more than a handful thus far. They appeared here and there, scattered about the landscape. Some, mostly tall, thin and unstable-looking towers, were positioned on top of the low hills that dominated this world. Others, usually small and comfortable cottages, were located alongside bubbling streams or small lakes.

Ginny had even seen what appeared to be the now--in the waking world--non-existent number four Privet Drive. How it had managed to appear in the depths of Harry's mind Ginny did not know, but she had studiously avoided the seemingly innocent dwelling. She reasoned that Privet Drive would, considering Harry's experiences there, not be a pleasant place to visit.

By far the most interesting, and most disturbing structure Ginny had found was the Burrow. It had been duplicated almost perfectly, clearly a replica constructed from Harry's memories of the times he had spent there. The sense of déjà vu that had come over Ginny during her short inspection of her home had been unnerving to say the least.

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*It felt just like home, only so horribly empty...*

At the moment, in her search for Harry, Ginny was steadily making her way to a range of distant, snow-capped mountains. Whenever she stood at the crest of one of the many hills, and if she squinted, Ginny thought she could make out what looked suspiciously like Hogwarts castle.

Unfortunately her journey towards the faraway mountains and castle seemed to be taking on the aspect of chasing after a mirage. She had been walking for hours, or perhaps days, or even weeks, yet the foothills and twisting spires of Hogwarts remained just on the edge of the horizon.

After a while spent contemplating the strange beauty of Harry's personal world, Ginny turned her attention back to Merlin. The most famous wizard in history, barring perhaps the four Founders, Dumbledore and Harry, was rambling on about how people kept invoking his name. He was currently complaining about how he was blamed for the divorce rate of socks when Ginny interrupted.

"Why is this taking so long?" she asked. "Harry's mind can't go on forever, can it?"

***\*Actually it can. A person's mind is only as limited as their imagination,\**** replied the voice she had come to identify as Isis, ***\*and Harry's imagination is almost boundless.\****

Ginny frowned and drew to a weary halt. "So how, exactly, do you suggest I set about finding Harry? He could be anywhere."

***\*Simple, my dear,\**** replied Merlin, ***\*follow the screams.\****

She almost took his comment as an attempt at sarcasm, but stopped her comeback when a low, keening wail reached her ears. Tilting her head to one side Ginny focused on the sound and tried to determine in which direction it lay.

Several minutes of silence passed before Ginny heard anything else, but this time the sound was different. It was not a howl of pain, but a roar of pure, animalistic fury. Ginny felt her mouth go dry as she recognised the fierce battle cry. She had heard it only a matter of days ago, in the real world, during and shortly after the destruction of number four Privet Drive.

Shrieks of what could only be agonising pain followed close on the heels of the primordial roar, which was repeated again and again. Loud cracks and booms of heavy objects crashing against each other resounded through the shallow valley Ginny was standing in. Challenging bellows rose into the air, only to be cut off by more cries of pain and howls of a mindless bloodlust.

***\*Better hurry,\**** urged the deep voice of Beowulf. ***\*I do not think the battle will last that much longer.\****

It was not difficult to determine in which direction the action was taking place, for clouds of dust and dirt were being kicked up. Ginny broke into a run, hurrying up the low hill between herself and the waging battle. Twice she stumbled in her haste and almost fell to the ground, but somehow she managed to remain on her feet.

Cresting the top of the hill, Ginny skidded to a halt. At the base of the hill, between a small stream and a cluster of oak trees, a war was being waged. It was too fierce and bloody to be thought of as anything less than a war. After that moment when she saw them, locked together in mortal combat,

Ginny knew the meaning a clash between titans.  
"Oh my God," she breathed, "Harry."

\*\*\*

The destruction of number four Privet Drive several days earlier had been an eye-opener for Ginny. Until then she had never truly comprehended just how powerful Harry actually was. He had always tempered his unmatched strength with an iron will and stern self-discipline. Now, however, Harry was no longer in control, and the power of the Order was being unleashed in a fit of unequalled carnage.

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Not all that far below where Ginny was standing, Harry, in the form of an Imperial Arch Griffin, was locked in a bloody battle with five dragons. All five were identical with the coal black hides that marked them as Hungarian Horntails. No, Ginny quickly realised that she was wrong. Harry was not fighting five Horntails. He was wrestling against only two. The other three were already dead.

Even though Ginny knew that it was not truly Harry, she could not help but be awed by the fluid grace and predatory intelligence with which the Griffin fought. With a nimbleness Ginny would never have expected from such a large creature, the Griffin hopped to one side, narrowly dodging a fiery blast from one of the Horntails.

The double fisted blow that the Griffin then dealt, only an instant later, knocked the huge black dragon into the air and back fifty yards. The Horntail fell to the earth with a ground-shaking crash and skidded for several yards before coming to a stop.

Before the dragon had even hit the earth, the Griffin had spun around and leapt upon the second Horntail. His taloned claws slashed down across the dragon's chest in a crosswise motion. As the dragon staggered back under the assault the Griffin crouched low and swung himself in a tight arc, the razor-sharp golden tips of his right wing slicing into the Horntail. The Griffin jumped back as thick red blood sprayed out from the jagged wound and kicked out with one of his legs, knocking the mortally wounded dragon back.

*Sweet and merciful heavens*, thought Ginny with reluctant admiration, *he's brutal*.

Blood coated the Griffin's arms up to the elbow and was dripping in sheets from the claws on his feet and the blades edging his wings. The Horntail thrashed wildly about as its hind legs collapsed underneath it. The beast mewled pitifully as its lifeblood seeped from its belly, dripping to the ground where tendrils of smoke began to rise as the grass started to burn from the intense heat. The Griffin threw back its head to roar in triumph over his victory.

His victory was short-lived however, as the other dragon had managed to stumble onto its feet again and launch itself at the distracted Griffin. With an almost gleeful roar the dragon's head swung in, narrow jaws parted wide, and the Horntail sank its fangs into the Griffin's neck. A howl of pain mixed with rage sounded as the Griffin staggered under the dragon's weight.

"Omigod!" breathed Ginny in terror, feeling horrified that Harry was being hurt. She reached for her wand without thinking, only to come up empty-handed. Her wand was currently resting on the nightstand in Ron's room, practically a world away at the moment. A moment later, however, Ginny's fears were allayed as Harry fought off the dragon single-handedly.

Literally.

With the Horntail clinging to his back like a limpet, its teeth buried in his neck, the Griffin reached back with his right arm and grabbed it by one of the horns crowning its head. For a moment the Horntail paused, as if confused by the contact. With a furious bellow the Griffin doubled over, pulling at the same time and tossing the dragon over his shoulder.

As the dragon crashed down, kicking up a cloud of dust, the Griffin swung his left arm down and across. With a sound like tearing canvas, his already bloodstained, golden talons cleaved through one of the dragon's wings. The leathery membrane seemed to part at the seams and the fallen beast howled in agony and fury.

The Griffin spun deftly around on his legs and began raining blows upon the Horntail, his fists striking the dragon's armoured hide with solid thunks. Several loud cracks echoed through the air and the dragon squealed with pain, thrashing violently as it tried to pull away from the rampaging Animagus. Heaving with all its strength, the Horntail managed to roll to one side and push itself off the ground and into a low crouch. Its tattered wing hung limply at its side. With what seemed like desperation, the dragon breathed a stream of fire towards its opponent, but it was to no avail. The Griffin ducked down low and the tongue of flame passed harmlessly above his back, scarcely even brushing his tightly furled wings.

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With an anticipatory roar, the Griffin leapt up from below and slashed his right hand across the dragon's face in a vicious uppercut. The dragon dropped to the ground, the left side of its head torn to bloody ribbons. As it fell, the Griffin ducked in even closer and tore at the Horntail's exposed throat with his golden fangs.

The Horntail tried to resist its foe, but its weak struggles quickly died away, and after a minute or so, it simply hung limp. The Griffin growled and shook his head about, refusing to release his hold on the dragon until all signs of life had finally fled. Once he was certain the Horntail was truly dead, the Griffin relaxed his jaws and let the body fall away with a contemptuous snarl.

He backed away several giant strides and stared down at his defeated foe. A minute passed, then two, and then the Griffin threw back its head and roared in exultation. It was a sound that conveyed so

many primal emotions and feelings that Ginny shuddered when she heard it.

It was satisfaction.

It was revelry.

It was enjoyment.

It was terrifying.

It was looking at her.

Several seconds passed before that realization sank into Ginny's awareness and when it did the teenaged girl was only able to think two words: *Oh shit*. It was perhaps fortunate for Ginny that she was unaware of the fact that these were statistically the most popular last words used by people who died violent deaths.

"Merciful God, he's going to eat me," she whispered, finding her gaze locked with the burning emerald orbs that were now fixed upon her.

\*...\*

"Not like that!" she snapped a moment later. Somehow Ginny knew what kind of lewd train of thought was making its way around the Order. "I mean literally! He's going to swallow me up whole!"

Apparently the Griffin was thinking along much the same lines as Ginny was, for he was eyeing her in a manner usually reserved for hors d'oeuvres. A thrumming growl rumbled from deep within his chest, like two boulders grinding together. His lips parted, in what Ginny could swear was a toying smirk, revealing his glistening fangs.

Like the Hogwarts Express steaming along at full throttle, the Griffin charged towards where Ginny was standing on the low-lying hill. He was moving so rapidly that he appeared as little more than a large, snowy white blur, edged in gold. With a semi-terrified yelp, Ginny jumped to the side, barely escaping the marauding Animagus as it tore up the ground where she had been only a moment before. Unfortunately Ginny lost her footing during her leap to safety and quickly found herself tumbling down the slope of the hill. Instinctively she tried to halt her ungainly, not to mention painful, descent. However, a frustrated roar from the Griffin convinced Ginny that her priority was to get as far from the hundred-foot-tall monster as possible.

After rolling nearly all the way to the foot of the hill, Ginny quickly scrambled onto her hands and knees, pushing off into a desperate run. She had made perhaps thirty or forty yards when a large shadow swept over her. A moment later Ginny skidded to a halt as the Griffin dropped to earth fifty yards in front of her, on the other side of the small brook that was bubbling along.

"Oh hell, I forgot he could fly," she muttered as the Griffin tucked his wings behind him and growled menacingly at her.

***\*This isn't reality, Ginny,\**** a voice reminded her as panic began to set in, ***\*remember that.\****

"How exactly does this help me?" she asked waspishly, her eyes never straying from the giant animal across from her. "Real or not, he's going to crush me like a bug at this rate."

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***\*All this is just a state of mind. And not just Harry's, but yours as well.\****

The Griffin began to stalk slowly towards Ginny, each step causing the earth to tremble beneath her feet. She licked her lips and swallowed, not bothering to turn and run because she knew she would never be able to outrun such a predator.

"So?"

***\*So, if it's only a state of mind, then change your state of mind!\****

\*\*\*

The Imperial Arch Griffin was, if nothing else, exceedingly surprised by the turn of events he had just witnessed. The puny prey animal he had been hunting was no longer a puny prey animal to be hunted. Even more surprising was how powerfully she slammed into him. Even those large black fire animals he had fought earlier had not been this strong.

The unexpected impact knocked the Griffin over, toppling him back with his newfound opponent falling on top of him. Faster than thought, acting on the pure instinct that had served him so well up until now, the Griffin rolled with the movement. He managed to wedge his legs between his body and the not-prey animal.

Still rolling backwards, the Griffin heaved and bucked with all his might, kicking out hard against his foe. She was launched high into the air, obviously surprised by his retaliation. The instant he was free of her hold, the Griffin leapt to his feet and spun to face her, roaring in challenge at the strangely familiar creature he was fighting.

Her massive, yet slender and streamlined body twisted in the air and after a moment of almost, but not quite, controlled flight, she smashed into the ground. A sharp cry of pain escaped from her as she collided with one of the pine trees that lined the stream they were fighting near.

The Griffin watched expectantly as wood splintered and cracked, unable to withstand her weight and inertia. As the tree twisted to one side and fell down, the Griffin watched with something akin to disbelief as the female flipped over. Her lithe body swung up and over, landing lightly amidst the surviving trees.

A new feeling made itself known to the Griffin as the female crouched in a low and threatening posture, arms spread wide and gleaming teeth bared. Unlike the black fire animals, this female was not weak and soft and slow. She was answering his challenge.

He felt... approval?

The female bent her legs until her knees were almost touching the ground and then, a roar of her own, she kicked off and into the air. The broad spans of her snow feathered wings beat down in three short

bursts, lifting her high above him. He watched as she rose against the backdrop of a vermillion and orange streaked sky. The female's movements were cautious and unsteady, revealing her inexperience at flying, but still, he felt it again.

Approval, yes.

But different somehow.

More satisfying, like the sensation he remembered after his first kill, while feeling the thick blood of his prey sliding thickly, hotly, down his throat.

Pride?

Baring his teeth in a mockery of a grin, he too pushed off and away from the earth beneath him. The strokes of his wings were sure and confident, allowing him to quickly catch and bear down upon the female. She attempted to manoeuvre away from him, spinning in a tight arc and trying to slash at him with the razor edges of her wings.

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With what was almost a barking laugh, he reached out with one taloned hand and gripped her tightly by the ankle. He jerked almost playfully downwards and reached up with his other hand to cup the back of her head. Pulling with all his might, and aided by his wings, he levered himself above her while at the same time forcing her down. His right leg lashed out and the heel of his foot crashed into her sternum.

She fell to earth a great deal faster than she had risen above it. With a thunderous crash that kicked up a cloud of dust, leaves and blossoms, the female crashed into a grove of cherry trees. The tiny pink flowers erupted into the air, reminding him of snow falling during the cold season.

He landed just outside the line of trees, peering into the veil of pink that had yet to settle. He did not have to wait very long. With her wings tucked tightly behind her back, the female burst from the swirling blossoms, her white fur mottled with the tiny pink flowers.

Harry had only a moment to blink before she was upon him, raining blows into his chest and stomach. Caught off guard he staggered back, trying to ward off her attack. He could hear a deep growl of frustration resonating from the female as she fought.

She was angry.

He could smell the change in her scent.

No, she was not angry.

His distraction cost him as the female twisted and kicked him hard in the chest. Harry teetered back and barely managed to duck under a swing at his head. Unfortunately her other arm curved in at around the same time and a stinging bite told him that Ginny's gold talons had torn into his shoulder.

*She's pissed off.*

Although he never saw it himself, Harry would be told many times in the future that the look which suddenly flashed upon his face had been almost indescribable. Whenever the topic would be brought up, Ginny would begin to giggle, then chuckle, then laugh, the cackle and eventually fall to the ground and roll on the floor, unable to breathe from her mirth.

The sleek, undeniably beautiful, yet undeniably lethal, Imperial Arch Griffin that was standing across from him paused in her attack. Her furious attack tapered off to a halt in only a second, and she jumped several large steps backwards, giving Harry a wide berth. They stood there, staring, for long minutes before anything happened.

//Ginny?// asked Harry, his leonine face taking on a timid, uncertain expression. At least as timid and uncertain as an Imperial Arch Griffin could manage. He blinked with surprise at the deep timbre of his voice, but continued to ask, //Is that you?//

//Last time I checked, yes,// replied Ginny, sounding very much relieved. Even so, she cautiously kept her guard up, weary of continued attack from Harry.

Harry blinked again and looked at Ginny. With an appraising gaze he noted the shimmering white fur and the feathered wings. After several moments of silence, in which Harry tried to gather his thoughts, he eventually managed to say, //You look... different.//

Ginny cocked a wry eyebrow at him, something of an accomplishment for a Griffin, and noted in an wry tone of voice, //I'm not the only one.//

Puzzled by her meaning Harry glanced down at himself and could not help the double take, nor the startled exclamation that followed. He lifted his clawed hands in front of him, looking with awe at the gleaming golden talons and asked in a hushed voice, //What's happened to me?//

//What do you remember?// asked Ginny, easing out of her weary stance and slowly approaching him.

//Uncle Vernon, he... he...// replied Harry, frowning as he struggled to remember. Shaking his head and mane, in an attempt to clear the cobwebs from his brain, Harry felt his eyes grow wide as the memories began to flood back to him. //Son of a bitch. He shot me!//

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//Then what?//

//It... it... it was inside of me. Something. It got loose.//

Ginny rumbled in what Harry took as a chuckle, //Took most of Privet Drive with it too.//

Harry then asked the one question he thought could explain this mess he had suddenly found himself in. //Am I dead?//

As he asked he felt a strange sensation wash over him, a tingling in his arms, legs and body. His muscles felt like they were both cramping and turning into jelly at the same time. Also, everything in the world seemed to become bigger. When he turned to look at Ginny he was surprised to see that she was looking just as he remembered her, no longer an Imperial Arch Griffin, but a fifteen year old girl.

He waved a hand nervously in front of him and explained his reasoning. "I mean... he shot me."

"I know," Ginny admitted, ducking her head, "I felt it."

"Sorry," apologised Harry, wincing at the thought that his pain was also hers.

Ginny literally jumped at him then, latching her arms around him in a fierce hug. Her legs wrapped around his waist, and a moment later Harry found himself sitting on a patch of torn up grass with a shaking Ginny crying into his shoulder. "Oh god, Harry. I'm so sorry."

Naturally Harry did not have any idea why Ginny was getting herself so worked up about this. "Sorry? For what?"

"For not being there for you," explained Ginny, in broken words scattered between her sobs.

"You couldn't have known," Harry tried to soothe her, gently rubbing his hands across her back in languid circles.

Unfortunately this did not have the desired effect of calming her down. If anything Ginny's sobbing increased to the point where she was bawling her eyes out. "I left you alone. I knew what they were like, and I left you with them. I'm so sorry."

Harry continued to softly caress her, reaching up with one hand to cup her chin and pull her away from his shoulder. "Sssh. It's all right, Gin," he told her. "It's all okay now."

"I'm never leaving you alone again, Harry. Never," she vowed decisively, loosening her grip on him to poke him in the chest with a finger. "Even if you don't want me, I'm not going to stay away. You'll never be alone again. I promise."

Harry looked into her glistening brown eyes and smiled. "I'll never leave you either, Ginny," he told her, leaning in to tenderly press his lips against hers. The hand which had been cupping her chin reached around to play through her hair and pull her tightly against him. The kiss lasted for what was either an age or an instant, or possibly both.

"Gin?" asked Harry as he pulled back, but still gently stroked his hand through her hair.

"Yes, Harry?"

"Where the heck are we?"

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## 29. Back at the Burrow

"I have never truly realized the *depths of stupidity* Minister Fudge is capable of. Until now."

Sirius Black cocked a wry eyebrow as Arthur Weasley strode purposefully into the kitchen at the Burrow. With a huff, the balding man pulled out a chair and almost threw himself into it, his face marred with an angry scowl.

"He may be a stubborn, officious buffoon," admitted Dumbledore, sipping his tea, "but, thanks to Harry's efforts, he is a stubborn, officious buffoon that is on *our* side."

"You say that as if it were a good thing," noted Sirius, twirling a biscuit in his fingers.

Remus, sitting opposite Sirius, chuckled appreciatively and reached for a scone. "I only wish I had been there to see Fudge's face when Harry told him about that poison."

Fred and George, sitting to either side of Sirius, started giggling like five-year-olds as they pictured the scene. They had both been extremely taken by the recent revelation that Sirius and Remus were in fact the infamous Padfoot and Moony.

Of course they, along with Bill and Charlie, had come within a hairsbreadth of stunning Sirius when he revealed himself, changing back from his Animagus form to human before their eyes not half an hour before. It had taken some quick explaining on the parts of Ron, Hermione and Remus to convince them of his innocence.

"Can't believe he did that," chortled Fred.

"Poisoning the Minister's cup of tea," laughed George. "Oh, I would have paid *Galleons* to see that happen."

Molly Weasley, returning to the table with a fresh pot of tea, frowned at the two boys, "Fred, George!

This is no laughing matter. Be serious for once."

Sirius watched with amusement as the twins put on indignant expressions and announced in stereo,

"We are being serious!"

"Somehow I doubt that," noted Hermione, who was sitting next to Ron.

Fred looked over at her in mock disbelief and asked, "Why don't you believe us?"

Charlie Weasley sat his cup down on the table and stated, "Experience."

"You're never serious," agreed Bill.

"Hey, he resembles that remark!" declared George in mock outrage, pointing at Sirius.

"Boys," warned Arthur, hiding his smile behind the rim of his teacup as he took a sip.

Molly placed the pot of tea in the centre of the kitchen table and sat down in her place next to her husband, shaking her head with disapproval. She glared at the two pranksters in a manner not dissimilar to a sabre-toothed tiger and then turned to Sirius apologetically. "I'm so sorry for how rude they're being. They simply refuse to act like proper gentlemen."

Sirius waved her apology aside, still twirling his biscuit. "Nothing to get upset about, Molly. If anything, I was probably worse when I was their age."

"I'll vouch for that," agreed Remus with a smirk.

"Oh, put a sock in it, Moony."

"Did you ever dye all the Slytherins pink?" asked Fred--or it might have been George--with interest. Both boys leaned eagerly forward, only to have their mother scold them for pestering their guests.

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Any further byplay was cut short when Dumbledore cleared his throat. Once everyone's attention was

gathered, the headmaster turned to Arthur. His eyebrows were raised in question, and he asked in a calm voice, "What has Cornelius decided about the Dursley family's disposition?"

Arthur scowled deeply, forewarning Sirius that the news he was about to deliver would not be what they desired to hear. "The arrogant fool will not be pressing charges. He isn't even planning to have an Obliviator change their memories of what happened. In fact, he's offering to resettle them in a new home, with a thousand Galleons taken from the Potter vault as compensation for the destruction of Privet Drive."

Exclamations of disbelief and muted fury swept across the table at this announcement.

"That rat bastard!" shouted Ron, angrily slamming his fist on the table top.

"Ronald Weasley! I'll tolerate no such language in this house!" berated Molly, glaring fiercely at her youngest son.

Ron jumped up from his seat, waving his arms about. "But it's true! That fat fu- uh... fool, Dursley, actually *shot* Harry and all Fudge does is try and cover it up? He apologises to them and actually uses *Harry's* money to pay them off?"

Reaching up from where she was still sitting, Hermione grabbed hold of Ron's shoulder and pulled him back down to his seat. After waiting for him to take several calming breaths, the bushy-haired teenager looked across the table to Dumbledore. "Can they honestly pay the Dursleys with money from Harry's vault?"

"Unfortunately," admitted Dumbledore, frowning with displeasure. "Cornelius is doubtless bitter regarding Harry's control over him. He must be using this as an opportunity to exact some measure of revenge against him."

"Smarmy git," growled Sirius, "Dursley shot him, and Harry's the one that has to pay for it? I'm more than tempted to pay them both a visit and give them a piece of my mind."

Remus shook his head. "Harry did destroy Privet Drive using magic illegally out of school in doing so. With Harry's gunshot wounds completely healed we have no physical proof that Dursley made any attempt on his life."

Ron smashed his fist onto the table again. "I saw it! So did Mum and Dad! So did Ginny!"

Arthur and Molly visibly cringed at the mention for their daughter's name. Arthur brought his cup to his lips and sipped his tea. Lowering the cup to the table, he nervously cleared his throat and glanced through the kitchen door towards the stairs. "I don't doubt Ginny will be rather... unhappy with this news."

"No kidding," agreed Fred, "she'll probably Apparate to the Ministry and rip Fudge a new one."

"Fred Weasley!"

Fred shrugged unapologetically. On Sirius' other side George leaned forward and placed his hands on the table. "Don't joke, she probably would and probably could. When it comes to Harry, Ginny wouldn't hesitate doing something like that."

Charlie nodded in agreement with George's assessment. "From what I've seen and heard, she just might at that. Don't forget how she literally blew Harry off his feet while the rest of us combined could barely manage to make him twitch."

"I never thought they would grow so close so quickly," muttered Molly, slumping in her chair.

"They're both so young, Ginny especially..."

"Virginia cannot stay your little girl forever, Molly," observed Dumbledore with a hint of reproach in his voice.

Molly sighed dejectedly. "I know. But I was hoping she could wait until she was older. Y'know, eighteen, nineteen... maybe fifty..."

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Dumbledore smiled and poured himself another cup of tea. "Young love. It is a wonderful thing to watch as it blossoms. Even if it does herald the beginning of a child's growth into adulthood."

Sirius nodded his agreement and wistfully said, "James and Lily were much the same, weren't they?"

"Although Lily did tend to bash Prongs upside his thick skull a bit more," noted Remus, smiling

serenely as he nibbled on a biscuit.

"I think Ginny's the only one that could smack Harry," admitted Ron thoughtfully. "This thing she has with the Order..."

Any further trains of thought on the matter were abruptly derailed at their stations when a wave of shimmering blue and green energy washed through the Burrow kitchen. Sirius almost fell out of his chair as a tickling sensation on his skin built to a peak and then faded away just as quickly, accompanied by what sounded like pixies laughing merrily in the distance.

Remus, who had spilled his tea, pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed at his dripping shirt. He looked across at Sirius and then Dumbledore as everyone jumped to their feet. "What the devil was that?" he asked.

"Harry," breathed Dumbledore, as well as all of the Weasleys.

Without any need to continue speaking, the entire group fled the kitchen at a dead run, Sirius leading the way in his excitement. He bounded up the crooked staircase, taking three steps at a time, with Ron and Hermione close on his heels. Reaching the top Sirius charged down the narrow passage towards the door marked as "Ronald's Room".

Sirius grabbed the doorknob and pulled. After a moment he changed from pulling to pushing. Without even a creak of protest the door to Ron's room remained firmly shut. Sirius jiggled the knob and swore under his breath. Ron and Hermione had caught up with him, closely followed by Fred, George and Remus. Not much later the other adults arrived, Molly Weasley puffing with a hand at her side as

Dumbledore strode up to stand just behind Sirius.

"I can't open it!" growled Sirius angrily, bashing his shoulder against the door in an attempt to force his way in.

"Permit me, Sirius," said the headmaster, placing a restraining hand on his shoulder. As Sirius backed down a step or two, Dumbledore drew out his wand and began waving it at the door. After a minute of careful work he raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Young Virginia appears to be more adept at Locking Spells than any of us had thought."

Arthur looked at Dumbledore in disbelief, "Ginny? Our Ginny locked the door with a spell?"

The old wizard nodded thoughtfully, stroking his chin with a finger as he considered the door that barred their way. With a slight frown he cast a spell that Sirius was unfamiliar with and a second later the door swung open with a soft creak.

First into the room were Ron and Hermione, who barged past the adults, only to come to such an abrupt halt that everyone piled into each other. Sirius, who had followed immediately after the two youngsters, almost tripped over them but managed to retain his balance.

Looking over their heads he instantly spotted Harry... and Ginny.

In bed.

Together.

Naked.

Sirius' thought processes were about to shut down and go into hibernation when Molly began to yell in indignation and outrage.

"VIRGINIA WEASLEY! WHAT THE DEVIL DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING?!"

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"VIRGINIA WEASLEY! WHAT THE DEVIL DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING?!"

"Waking me up," rasped Harry. Lying in Ron's bed, slowly having full consciousness return to him, Harry could only compare how he felt to an ant being stepped on by a dragon.

*No, not a dragon, something bigger. Dudley, maybe.*

His muscles, even the ones he had not known about, were throbbing painfully with every breath he took. Ginny had told him about how he had annihilated number four Privet Drive, as well as his little rampage afterwards. He just had not expected it to hurt this much.

*And speaking of Ginny...*

It was a very good thing that his girlfriend had confessed that they would be waking up naked in Ron's bed together. Otherwise Harry might have had a similar reaction to Mrs Weasley upon slowly rising out of Morpheus' grip. As it was, he could feel Ginny's body pressing against him in ways that were causing havoc with his blood circulation.

Cautiously Harry opened his eyes. First he opened his left, with which he briefly surveyed Ron's room and the dumbstruck forms of the Weasleys, Hermione, Sirius, Remus and Professor Dumbledore.

After a moment wondering how he has going to talk his way out of this one, Harry cracked open his right eye and look up at the beautiful face hovering over him.

"Harry?" asked Ginny, her voice trembling as she gazed down at him with worried eyes.

"Last time I checked, yeah," Harry confirmed, noticing how hoarse his voice sounded.

The relief that swept over Ginny was palpable, and Harry could feel the tension drain out of her as her body relaxed against his. This naturally drew Harry's attention back to the fact that both he and Ginny were somewhat lacking in the clothing department.

Ginny was lying atop of him, the full length of her body pressed against him. Beneath the sheets that were drawn up to her shoulders, he could feel that their legs had become entwined. Her right arm was resting along his side and her hand grasped his left shoulder, while her other hand and fingers were higher up and stroking his temple.

As she sagged against him, Harry could feel Ginny's breasts against his chest and her hips straddling his own. The burning heat of her body was suffusing his aching limbs and torso with a delicious warmth that made him want to remain in that bed with her forever.

*Y'know, she does feel good. I could get used to this.*

"WOULD YOU BE SO KIND TO EXPLAIN TO ME, YOUNG LADY," roared Molly Weasley, loud enough to eclipse even a Howler for sheer volume, "WHAT IN MERLIN'S NAME YOU ARE DOING IN HERE?!"

Out the corner of his eye, Harry could see the still gob-smacked forms of the other Weasleys, along with Hermione, his favourite Defence Against the Dark Arts professor and his wayward godfather.

Only Professor Dumbledore seemed to be taking the situation in stride, a faint smile gracing his lips. Molly continued her tirade, pushing her way to the front of the gawking crowd clustered at around the doorway. Her usually pleasant face was a shade of red that Harry felt could match that of a sun ripened tomato. "LOUNGING ABOUT IN YOUR OWN BROTHER'S BED, ON TOP OF A SICK BOY, WITHOUT ANY CLOTHES ON..."

Harry, in a sudden fit of mischief brought on by seeing Fred and George, reached a hand up to gently stroke Ginny's bare shoulder and draw her attention away from the looming ferocity of her mother. A devious scheme was beginning to form in his mind, and he decided it would definitely be worth it just to see the looks on their faces.

*Besides which, it'll divert Molly's attention to me instead of Ginny. If things get out of hand I can also pretend I was delusional at the time.*

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"Gin?" he asked as his young girlfriend drew back enough to look into his eyes again. Her fiery red

tresses framed her face and cascaded to either side of his head, tickling his cheeks.

"Yes, Harry?" asked Ginny, around the continuing rants Molly was blasting her with.

"...MY ONE AND ONLY DAUGHTER GOING AROUND AND ACTING LIKE A SCARLET WOMAN! NO SHAME OR DECORUM WHATSOEVER..."

Harry put on the most earnest and innocent expression he could muster and, in what he hoped was a slightly confused tone of voice, asked, "Are we awake now?"

Ginny smiled slightly and nodded her head. "Yes, Harry."

"...WILL NOT TOLERATE MY FLESH AND BLOOD, MY CHILDREN, LIVING IN SIN UNDER MY OWN ROOF..."

"Oh... good," Harry frowned as if puzzled and then asked, "Gin?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Am I naked?"

Saying those words and keeping a straight face doing so was one of the hardest things Harry had ever done, but somehow he succeeded. He struggled to hide the amusement he knew was beginning to sparkle in his eyes as Ginny immediately began to blush profusely, and Molly's invectives almost faltered for a moment before switching to a new line of attack.

"DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU HAVE DONE? THE POOR BOY, AT THE VERY BRINK OF DEATH'S DOOR, BARELY AWARE OF WHAT'S GOING ON AROUND HIM AND YOU PRACTICALLY MOLEST HIM..."

"Yes, Harry," Ginny admitted in an embarrassed voice.

"Oh... good," Harry nodded in acceptance, making it look as if he were taking her answer in a somewhat dazed stride. After a few seconds pretending to consider it, while Molly continued to rain her outrage down on Ginny, Harry frowned again and queried, "Gin?"

"Yes, Harry?" responded the still blushing teenager, gentling biting down on her bottom lip.

Despite his best efforts Harry could not totally suppress his own faint blush as he asked, "Are you naked?"

This time Ginny managed to turn a truly remarkable shade of red, as did Molly and everyone else present – with the sole exception being Dumbledore. In fact, the headmaster was the only person present that tried to calm Mrs Weasley, but had yet to get a word in edgewise. Ginny's blush was so complete that even her faint smattering of freckles disappeared beneath it. "Yes, Harry."

"...CLIMBING INTO BED – WITH HARRY POTTER NO LESS! NOT A SHRED OF RESPECT OR CONCERN FOR THE DEAR BOY'S SENSITIVE NATURE OR CONDITION! I DID NOT RAISE YOU TO ACT LIKE THIS, VIRGINIA..."

"Oh... good." Harry knew that he did not have much time left. The struggle to mask his growing amusement was becoming more difficult with each second, and his ears were beginning to ring from Mrs Weasley's continued bellows.

"...MORGANA'S BANE, I DON'T KNOW HOW I'LL BE ABLE TO SHOW MY FACE IN THE VILLAGE IF WORD OF THIS EVER GOT OUT!"

He glanced at the others, noting how everyone except Dumbledore were practically cowering as Molly paced back and forth. Harry looked at Ginny, who was still lying across his chest and stomach, and was distressed to see guilty tears beginning to form in her bright brown eyes. "Gin?" he asked.

"Yes, Harry?" asked Ginny in a plaintive tone, her bottom lips trembling.

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"...AND YOUR FATHER, DID YOU EVEN BOTHER TO CONSIDER HIM? THEY COULD BRING HIM UP ON CHARGES FOR THIS! HARRY IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY WHILE STAYING IN THIS HOUSE..."

Harry glanced one last time at the marauding Molly Weasley and then asked in a perfectly calm voice,

"We haven't done anything yet, have we?"

If Ginny had been blushing furiously before, she was now almost glowing the same colour as the setting sun. She looked down at him with obvious horror and moved her mouth, but failed to produce any words.

Molly, who had just been starting on the idea of having Ginny transferred from Hogwarts to a remote nunnery in Northern Ireland, trailed off abruptly. She stopped in mid-pace and crossed her arms, watching and waiting for her daughter's reply.

After several seconds of gaping down at Harry in shocked disbelief, Ginny managed to gather enough of her wits to shake her head and say, "No, Harry."

"Thank every merciful angel..." breathed Molly in an almost inaudible prayer. Everyone else, most notably Arthur and the assorted Weasley brothers, also seemed to heave sighs of relief.

With a theatrical sigh of disappointment Harry sank his head back against the pillow. He looked up at Ginny, feeling his impassive mask beginning to crack, and sighed, "Oh... pity."

What sounded like a soft snort of amusement from Dumbledore caused Harry's eyes to flick to where the others were standing by the door. The aged wizard's moustache was twitching with mirth and his blue eyes twinkled merrily over the rims of his spectacles.

"WHAT?!?" Molly jerked upright and stared at Harry, her eyes so wide with shock that he was almost worried they might pop right out of their sockets. Her face, which had only just begun returning to its normal colour, immediately flushed a deep red once again as Mrs Weasley started sputtering.

Sirius and Remus, standing to either side Professor Dumbledore, had uplifted expressions on their faces as they watched. Rather it was Sirius that appeared delighted by the events unfolding before him,

while Remus watched with what looked like appalled resignation.

The Weasleys appeared to be simply speechless. Arthur was running his hand nervously through his already thinning hair, but otherwise seemed to be taking everything in stride. Bill and Charlie looked uncertain as how to react and were alternating between shock and amusement. The twins, Fred and George, were grinning in a greatly disturbing fashion.

Ron was staring at Harry and Ginny with an expression that matched the one Harry remembered seeing that time during their second-year when they had snuck into the Forbidden Forest and been captured by the Acromantulas. Hermione, whose shoulder Ron was holding in a white-knuckled death grip, was flushed almost as red as Ginny and was staring fixedly at her shoes.

*Got 'em*, thought Harry, his mouth curling into a mischievous grin as he looked back at Ginny. His girlfriend, and now bed partner, was watching him with narrowed eyes. *Uh oh*.

"You little sneak," she whispered into his ear, leaning close and pressing down on him. She surreptitiously, so as not to draw anyone's attention to it, ground her hips hard against him, causing Harry's breath to hitch in his throat. A strangled groan escaped his lips, and his hands slid up her thighs to still her hips.

"Don't do that," he croaked out, keeping his voice low so that only she heard him.

Ginny smirked wickedly at him and then pouted playfully. His firm hold on her hips prevented her from grinding against him, so instead she settled on rocking back and forth. With both the sheets and the fluffy orange bedspread drawn up to their shoulders the movement was almost imperceptible, except of course to poor Harry who was, unfortunately, all too aware of it. "Why?" she asked, sounding like a little girl that had just been scolded.

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*Not too far from the truth, actually.*

Harry swallowed nervously, aware that their audience was watching them closely, with the exception of Mrs Weasley who had decided to continue her diatribe on her only daughter's indecent actions.

"...CORRUPTED THE POOR BOY! YOU DON'T EVEN HAVE THE DECENCY TO WAIT APROPRIATELY BEFORE THROWING YOURSELF AT HIM..."

Apparently his attempt to divert Molly's attention from Ginny to himself had not met with any success. Instead the Weasley matriarch seemed convinced that Ginny had somehow managed to twist Harry's fragile state of mind.

"...A VICTIM OF YOUR OWN PERVERTED NEED FOR GRATIFICATION..."

"Because," he whispered in Ginny's ear as his right hand trailed lightly up her spine, "I think it would be best if we tried to calm your mum down before her head explodes. I don't imagine anyone would be pleased if that happened."

"Probably not," agreed Ginny, rearing back slightly and almost exposing her breasts as she lifted away from his chest. Fortunately the sheets were drawn up high enough over them to shield her from view of those at the door. "But how do you plan on doing that, might I ask? None of us, not even Dad, have been able to get her to stop in the middle of one of these rants."

Harry turned, as much as he could, and addressed Molly, "Mrs Weasley..."

"...A BETRAYAL OF TRUST, THAT'S WHAT THIS IS..."

"Mrs Weasley."

"...MY ONLY DAUGHTER, WHO I RAISED AS BEST I COULD, PRACTICALLY RAPING THE-BOY-WHO-LIVED..."

"Mrs Weasley!"

"...NEVER IN A THOUSAND YEARS, NO, NEVER IN A THOUSAND EONS..."

"MRS WEASLEY!!"

Molly came to an abrupt halt, almost tripping over her feet and falling to the floor in surprise at Harry's insistent interruption. Harry smiled tiredly at her and breathed a sigh of relief at the sudden silence that seemed to echo through Ron's room. Even the ghoul in the attic was quiet after such a voluble scolding.

"Thank you, Mrs Weasley," he told her, trying to keep his voice level and professional sounding, much like in his Practical Fighting Techniques classes. He gave the woman he considered almost a mother an apologetic smile, "There's no need to yell at Ginny like this. I understand the situation fully and hopefully, after I've had a chance to explain, so shall you."

"But... but Harry," Molly began to protest.

Harry raised a hand to still her objections. "Mrs Weasley, everyone, Ginny simply did what was necessary to revive me. Unfortunately this required large amounts of skin-to-skin contact in order to effect a working mental connection. If anyone is at fault, it's me for not keeping my guard up around my uncle."

Ginny apparently found amusement in everyone's surprised reactions, especially her mum's, and began to relax. Her fierce crimson blush began to fade as she looked at Harry with a wry smile, shaking her head. Harry shrugged his shoulders and tickled her side with one hand when she leaned down and whispered accusingly in his ear, "Liar, liar, pants on fire."

Harry grinned impishly at her and retorted quietly, "What pants? You took them off remember?"

Dumbledore clapped his hands to capture everyone's attention and smiled at the two prone teenagers lying before him. "Well, Harry," he said with a smile, "I see you've made a full recovery."

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Ginny cautiously lifted the sheets a few inches and, with a salacious grin, made a show of peering beneath them, "He certainly has."

"Ginny!" protested Harry, grabbing the sheet from her with the hand he had been holding her hip with and pulling it down. This time he could feel the blood rising to his face and knew that he was blushing as brightly as she had been only moments earlier.  
"Got you!" she declared with a smug grin.

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**Warning:** The following has an R rating and contains some explicit imagery.

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"We're going now so that you two can get dressed," announced Molly Weasley, apparently beginning to recover from her shock at finding her only daughter in bed with Harry. "We'll be expecting you downstairs in the kitchen in five minutes. If you're not down, and fully clothed, in five minutes, I swear there will be hell to pay the likes of which neither of you have ever seen. Remember that and don't get up to any funny business. Get dressed and downstairs without any detours along the way, understand? We'll be waiting in the kitchen for you in precisely."

"Five minutes, yes, Mum," Ginny finished for her, a trace of impatience creeping into her voice. "We heard you perfectly clearly the first time."

With a huff and daring glare Molly turned and bustled her way out of Ron's room, pushing past the others. Ginny could just make out her mutters about the impropriety of the entire situation as she stalked down the passage to the stairs.

Bill and Charlie were next to leave the overcrowded room, giving both her and Harry commiserating, yet stern, nods as they left. After they had departed Dumbledore and Remus took Sirius by the elbows and pulled him out, leaving only the four remaining children standing watch over them.

"Heh," chuckled Fred, waving at the two bedridden teenagers, "we'll be seeing you downstairs then. Five minutes, remember that. No longer."

"Just enough time for a quickie," agreed George as the two older boys started to leave. "Make sure you don't do anything the two of us wouldn't."

"Which does not really prohibit us from doing much..." retorted Harry.

Ginny groaned and buried her head in the crook of Harry's shoulder. "Just get out of here and let us change in peace," she pleaded, hoping that for once they would do what she asked of them.

Once Fred and George's footsteps had retreated down the passage, Ginny looked up to see Ron and Hermione still waiting in the room. Harry also looked at his friends and asked jokingly, "I hope the two of you aren't expecting to stay while we get dressed. Voyeurism is definitely something your mums wouldn't approve of."

"Just don't try anything funny, Harry," asserted Ron in what passed for a threatening tone of voice.

"That's my sister you've got lying on top of you."

"Come on, Ron," urged Hermione, grabbing him by the arm and tugging him to the door. "You can perform your brotherly duty and threaten Harry once the two of them come downstairs."

Ginny let out a sigh of relief as her friend and the last of her brothers exited the room

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## 30. Musings and Hints

Mr and Mrs Dursley, of number six Kerry Lane, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you'd expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn't hold with such nonsense.

Unfortunately such nonsense had quite a good hold on them.

Vernon Dursley, the man of the house, was not having a particularly good week. Firstly Vernon's company, Grunnings Drills, had not been doing as well as he had hoped for during this the last quarter and, as much as he would like to, Vernon could not find a reasonable excuse to blame his firm's problems on his nephew.

His nephew, an undisciplined and unappreciative whelp named Harry Potter, was the cause of most of Vernon and his family's problems.

Not a week ago Harry had returned to the Dursleys' previous home, number four Privet Drive, after having spent the year at that misfit school of his up north. Ordinarily this would not have provoked the Dursleys into anything beyond contempt for the pitiful boy and result in an example of brutal antagonism and forced manual labour. After all, even if he was a freak, the boy could at least work for his room and board.

This was the way things were supposed to be, you see. The Dursleys were perfectly normal in every way, and it was only proper that Vernon, his wife Petunia and their son Dudley, attempt to beat the strangeness out of Harry. Whether this meant physically or verbally did not make much of a difference to Vernon, although he would concede that everything would probably have run a great deal smoother had he taken his belt to the boy earlier on.

This, you must understand, was the root of the problem.

Over the course of the previous summer, when Harry had returned from his schooling in a state of mild to severe depression, the boy had changed. Unfortunately, for Vernon and his family, these changes were not for the better. To be perfectly honest, and Vernon would deny it till his dying breath, the boy had begun to frighten him.

Which is why Vernon had taken matters into his own hands and, once the boy left to rejoin the other freaks, he moved to acquire a means of dealing with the problem. Unfortunately, even after all of the precautions he had taken, Vernon had been unable to resolve the situation with his nephew in a satisfactory manner.

After all, one could hardly consider the complete and utter destruction of one's home, and all the

earthly possessions therein, a satisfactory resolution to the situation. It was very unsatisfying, in fact, and possibly the key reason why Vernon was in such a foul temper this mid-Saturday morning. *It's all that damned boy's fault*, he thought, biting viciously down on his slice of slightly burnt toast. The other weirdos that had come after Harry had blown up number four, had been very apologetic and, though Vernon was loath to admit it, very accommodating in paying for the damages incurred and locating a new place of residence for the Dursley family.

Basically, it was the principle of the thing that kept Vernon in a bad mood. Either that or he was naturally an unpleasant person, but that was unlikely, wasn't it?

Vernon had managed to ignore his son's bleatings for the morning—he loved his Dudders but the boy did tend to complain a lot—when there was a crisp and loud knock on the front door. Vernon lowered the newspaper he had been reading and glared through the kitchen door into the entry hall of his new home.

Being interrupted during breakfast, on a Saturday, did not soothe his temper.

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The knocks on the front door were repeated, sounding perhaps a bit... impatient, and Vernon decided to give whomever it was a piece of his mind. Placing his paper down on the table and rising from his seat, Vernon stomped angrily out of the kitchen to the door. With a practised scowl, he swung the front door open and boomed, "We don't want any!"

The man standing on the doorstep gave absolutely no indication that he was even in the slightest manner put off by Vernon's open belligerence. Instead the man, who was a good few inches taller than Vernon, possessing a wiry, yet solid look physique and neatly trimmed black hair, nodded politely in greeting. With a calm and, in Vernon's opinion, ingratiating politeness he asked, "Mr Vernon Dursley?"

"Yes, who are you?" scowled Vernon, hoping to frighten this already annoying man away with a display of cultivated unpleasantness.

"Mr Vernon Dursley, director of Grunnings Drills?" asked the man, his midnight blue eyes sparkling with what Vernon instantly recognised as anticipation.

Vernon frowned and decided, in the interests of aiding his company, that perhaps a modicum of politeness was called for. "Yes, what of it? If this is a business call—"

The man smoothly interrupted and asked, "Mr Vernon Dursley, previously of number four Privet Drive?"

By now Vernon was growing a tad bit frustrated with his visitor. He was fairly certain that he had established his identity well enough and this constant inane questioning was beginning to work his already frayed nerves. "Yes, yes, what the devil do you want, man?"

"Mr Vernon Dursley, legal guardian of Harry James Potter?"

The blood in Vernon's veins frozen into ice, and he could literally feel as it drained from his face, undoubtedly leaving him pale as a sheet. Vernon swallowed desperately and tried to gather his wits and customary disdain for these wizarding folk.

"You - you're one of them! Aren't you?" he asked in return, feeling somewhat proud that he had managed to hold back from stuttering.

"Give the Muggle a round of applause," commented the dark man, who, Vernon noticed for the first time, was dressed completely in ominous black.

"W-w-wh-wh-wha-what do you want with us?"

What could only be considered an evil grin stretched the man's lips as he extended a hand and introduced himself in a mockingly pleasant tone. "Pleased to meet you Mr Dursley. My name is Sirius T. Black, and I have heard a great deal about you."

"S-Sirius Black?" Despite himself Vernon frowned and tried to concentrate, thinking back. "I know that name..."

"Indeed. Perhaps you heard about me on the trollivision?" suggested Black, his smile now one of a cat that was about to dine on not one, but three, plump canaries. "I'm Harry's godfather, recently escaped from Azkaban, the wizarding prison."

With the sudden numbness that had descended over him, Vernon was surprised that he managed to retain any of his mental faculties. Of course, considering the nature of the only word he was able to think, this was not saying very much.

*Godfather. Godfather. Godfather. Godfather. Godfather. Godfather...*

"Now, Vern - may I call you Vern?" Sirius, grinning like the psychotic killer Vernon knew him to be, swung an arm around Vernon's burly shoulders, turned him around and led him in an amiable fashion back into the house. "Let's go inside shall we?"

*Godfather. Godfather. Godfather. Godfather. Godfather. Godfather...*

"I think the two of us need to have a nice, quiet chat."

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They were standing by the fireplace looking, depending on the point of view, either incredibly cute or incredibly pathetic. Had either Molly or Arthur Weasley been present, they would have undoubtedly decided the two teenagers looked incredibly cute in that awkward way teenagers in love manage. If it had been the infamous Fred and George Weasley present, they would have declared the two as being incredibly pathetic in a lost puppy dog kind of way.

Fortunately for Ron and Hermione they were alone, with only each other, in the kitchen so the only opinions present were their own. Not that it helped much against the uncomfortable silence that

seemed to permeate the air.

Harry, still recovering from his ordeal, had said his goodbyes to Hermione after lunch and had retired to Ron's room. Nobody was surprised when Ginny, despite the voluble scolding she had received from her mother the day before, had immediately volunteered to accompany Harry and keep him company. Naturally nobody was too surprised when Mrs Weasley insisted that Charlie go with and keep an eye on the two smitten teenagers.

And so Ron and Hermione stood there.

Ron was standing on one side of the fireplace, shifting nervously from one foot to the other, with his hands clasped firmly behind his back and his attention focused on a very interesting point one foot above and to the left of Hermione's head. On the other side Hermione, with her overnight bag slung over her shoulder, was wringing her hands nervously in front of her while at the same time making a close examination of the kitchen floor.

After four or five minutes passed in this manner even Molly and Arthur would have had to admit that, truth be told, the two looked more pathetic than cute.

"I'd better get going," Hermione finally said, breaking the quiet before the tension could get any worse, if that was possible.

"Yeah," agreed Ron, sounding very dejected about the idea.

Hermione looked up from the floor and smiled weakly. "Hey, at least you get to have Harry stay with you the entire summer..."

"Oh, joy," he muttered sarcastically, "an entire summer of having my best friend jumping in bed with my little sister and shagging through the night. Yay."

"Ron! Honestly!" protested Hermione, glaring at her boyfriend.

The gangly, but starting to fill out rather nicely, youth scuffed his feet together and blushed as he hung his head. "I'm sorry," he apologised. "I'm just not used to the idea, that's all."

Hermione sighed and patted him on the shoulder. "Ron. They haven't done anything yet."

"How can you be so sure?" he asked, looking suspiciously at her.

"Because they told us so," she declared, rolling her eyes. Hermione looked at him with a small amount of frustration. "Just because they ended up in bed once, and only because Ginny was helping Harry, does not mean that they will be sleeping together for the rest of the holidays."

Ron sighed and leaned against the wall. "I know, but the thought of my best friend shagging my sister, if not now then later, makes me queasy..."

Hermione stomped her foot in annoyance. "Ron, please! Don't be so vulgar! Even if Harry and Ginny were going at it three times a night and all day on Sundays, they won't be 'shagging' - they'll be making *love*! Don't belittle what they have like that!"

By now Ron was a bright red in the face that almost matched his hair. "All right! All right! I apologise! Can we just stop talking about Harry and Ginny's sex life?"

"If you insist," Hermione conceded with a small smile. "If you'd prefer we can discuss our prospective sex life instead..."

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"Hermione!" protested Ron, jumping forward to clamp a hand over her mouth. Ignoring her muffled protests he cast an anxious look about, checking to see if anyone had overheard them.

Prying Ron's hand from her mouth, Hermione smirked at the flustered young man. "What is it, Ron? Are you ashamed to admit that we have a relationship?"

Ron frowned, oddly enough taking the question seriously. "Hermione, I'm proud to admit that you're my girlfriend. I'd shout it from the top of the Astronomy Tower - even if you looked like Mad-Eye Moody's twin sister. But I do not want my mum and dad to hear anything about when, where and how we make love - if we ever do."

Hermione, suitably impressed by his words, smiled warmly and enveloped Ron in a hug that could almost match one of Molly's. She drew back just enough to kiss him lovingly on the lips before pulling away and shifting the strap of her bag.

"I really have to go," she sighed, now sounding just as unwilling to leave as Ron was unwilling to have her go. "I was supposed to let Rita Skeeter out of the entomology exhibit at the zoo two days ago."

"Why don't you just leave her there?" suggested Ron, remembering how the reporter had dragged more than one person's reputation through the mud during the Triwizard Tournament.

Hermione smiled and shrugged. "Tempting, but I think spending a year living in a glass box is more than enough time to teach her the error of her ways."

Ron nodded reluctantly and then offered Hermione the flowerpot that held the Floo powder. "I'll miss you."

"Don't worry," she assured him, taking a pinch of Floo and throwing it in the fire, "I'll be back at the end of the month for Harry's birthday party and then for the last couple of days before next term starts."

As the flames burning in the fireplace flared high and a bright green, Ron sighed. "I'll still miss you." Hermione leaned forward to kiss him quickly before jumping into the fire. "Granger Residence!" Ron watched as the bushy haired girl disappeared from view, leaving behind only a puff of black soot and the crackling green fire. As the flames slowly died back down to normal and returned to a their normal yellow colour, Ron sighed wistfully.

"I love you..."

\*\*\*

"I hate snakes..."

Lucius Malfoy, for once looking less than perfectly groomed, turned his head so that he could sneer at the short man walking beside him. It was after midnight, what the Muggles called the witching hour, and Lord Voldemort had summoned his inner circle of Death Eaters.

"Not surprising," he snapped harshly. "Snakes do tend to keep the *rodent* population down."

Peter Pettigrew, more often than not known simply as Wormtail, cringed back from the scathing tone and disdainful glare Lucius held him under. Uncomfortable under Malfoy's gaze, he pulled his robes tightly around him, despite the fact that it was now summer. Lucius could see the gleam of silver from Wormtail's right hand in the pale moonlight as he shifted nervously about.

"Really, Lucius," declared a voice from the shadows. Lucius and Wormtail drew to a halt as one shadow detached itself and strode purposefully towards them. "You shouldn't be too harsh on our little traitor here. It's far too easy."

"My Lord, we come to serve," responded Lucius, dropping to his knees in supplication before his master. Beside him he could see Wormtail clumsily copying the motion.

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Voldemort smiled thinly and motioned for his two servants to rise as he crossed the large room the two Death Eaters had just entered. With a devilish glow in his red eyes the Dark Lord sat himself on a throne of ebony, his thin and skeletal hands stroking the arms of the chair.

"Has your son returned home from Hogwarts, Lucius?"

Lucius nodded. "Yes, my Lord. He arrived four days ago."

Voldemort's smile broadened, and he turned his scarlet eyes towards Wormtail. "Have you found the necessary items for the ceremony?"

Wormtail was cowering, but managed to nod and stutter, "Y-yes, my - my Lord. Everything has arrived, e-except for the powdered Kraken Beak, w-wh-which shall be arrive in - in two days a-a-and the Huorn sawdust the day a-after that."

"Not as early as I had hoped for," mused Voldemort, stroking his chin with one long finger. "I am displeased, but the delay is acceptable providing everything proceeds as I require. I will not punish you now for failing."

"Y-yes, my Lord," stuttered Wormtail in relief. "Thank you, my Lord."

Lucius sneered as his fellow Death Eater bowed low and grovelled. The pathetic fool was a coward and traitor, neither traits that Lucius trusted as far as he could throw a dragon. Wormtail had betrayed his only friends. What was to prevent him from repeating such an act?

His attention quickly returned to Voldemort as the Dark Lord shifted comfortably in his seat, slitted red eyes glowing in the darkness. His tiny and sharp looking teeth were bared in a smile that most Death Eaters were wise enough to try and avoid. Only fools such as Pettigrew thought this was a sign of approval.

It was not.

"Lucius..." Voldemort reached down as his familiar, Nagini, slithered between the two Death Eaters and coiled around the base of the Dark Lord's throne. Voldemort stroked the massive snake's flat head with a tenderness that belayed his dark nature. "The ceremony is to take place at midnight on the summer solstice. See that your son is fully prepared."

"He is ready, my Lord," Lucius responded, trying to keep the pride he felt out of his voice. "Narcissa has given Draco the scrolls he needs to learn, and he has been studying them since his return to Malfoy Manor."

Voldemort fixed Lucius with a penetrating stare that chilled his blood. It was all Lucius could do to prevent his knees from shaking. "I hope you are correct in your assessment, both for your son's sake and your own. I will not tolerate any failure in this endeavour."

Lucius shook his head and said with absolute certainty. "There is no need for concern, my Lord.

Draco's hatred for the Potter boy knows no bounds. He would gladly do anything required of him if it helped to ensure his death."

"It is not Potter's death I am concerned with, Lucius," remarked Voldemort. "Rather I wish to see him humiliated, disgraced and ultimately defeated. Then, perhaps, I might permit him to die a slow and painful death. Perhaps."

"A fitting punishment, my Lord," agreed Lucius, bowing in deference. "My son would be greatly honoured to aid you towards such a goal, even with his life and soul."

Voldemort's laugh was high and unpleasant. "Then he is a perfect candidate, Lucius - for that is what will be required of him!"

Lucius bowed again, deeper this time. "He shall not fail you."

"Pray that he does not," warned Voldemort, his expression a dangerous one. "I intend to bring several new Death Eaters into the black fold at the same time. You would do well to introduce young Draco to then, and the others, since he shall be working closely with them in the future."

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"As you command, my Lord."

Voldemort settled back in his throne and steepled his hands before him. The thin slits of his eyes peering over his fingers and glowing dangerously from beneath his cowl. "Soon it will be time to take action, time to strike the killing blow against that old fool and his pitiful allies. And when all is in place... then I shall march upon Hogwarts itself!"

Lucius almost grinned and laughed in delight, but managed to restrain himself. After all these long years of hiding, of waiting, of building and regaining all the strength and power lost to The Boy Who Lived, finally, the moment of retribution was nigh at hand.

Even that pathetic piece of rabble, Wormtail, seemed stirred by the Dark Lord's words. Of course he was probably just deliriously relieved that his master had seen fit not to punish him.

"Until then, we shall have to pass our time with other matters," concluded Voldemort, that terrifying smile returning as his eyes shifted from Lucius. "I think we should begin with Peter's punishment..." Wormtail, not being the brightest of souls, took several seconds to realize the meaning behind Voldemort's words. He did not even have a chance to cringe before thirteen and a half inches of yew were pointing his way.

"Crucid"

\*\*\*

Ginny stopped by the kitchen on her way out of the Burrow, fixing herself two large glasses of pumpkin juice in an attempt to wash away the foul taste in her mouth. It worked, to a degree, but the nauseous feeling she had since jerking awake refused to die down.

Ever since Halloween, when Harry had 'shared' one of his nightmares with Ron, Ginny had been wondering what one of Harry's nightmare visions was like. After having just experienced one in painfully vivid detail and clarity, she had begun to realize why cats needed nine lives.

Gritting her teeth and swallowing against the tremulous and queasy movements her stomach was still insisting on having, Ginny finished her second pumpkin juice. She washed the glass and set it down in the sink to dry overnight before leaving the kitchen through the back door and out into the Burrow's spacious back garden.

"Hopefully the fresh air will help," she thought, taking a deep breath as she padded barefoot across the damp grass.

Under the soft starlight and the silver glow of the crescent moon, Ginny could see Harry sitting silently on the small grassy knoll at the very back of the garden. A feeling of melancholic nostalgia filled her as she remembered the last time she and Harry had sat together there, the night before they had left for Hogwarts, nearly a year ago.

Harry was gazing up at the stars with a thoughtful expression, much as he had that night which seemed so far in the past. Ginny sank to the ground beside him, matching his posture and tilting her head back to stare up at the night sky.

An indeterminate amount of time passed, Ginny didn't know how long. It could have been a minute or an hour. Regardless of the actual duration the two young lovers sat in a comfortable silence and appreciated the heavens above.

"Knut for your thoughts?" Harry finally asked, breaking the silence.

"Sorry," she answered, "but they're worth more than that."

Harry looked down from the sky he was watching and turned to her. "How much? A Sickle?"

Ginny shook her head. "I don't know. Truth be told, I'm trying not to think about anything right now. If I did I might start throwing up again."

"I'm sorry you had to see that," he told her, shifting closer to her until they were brushing together. His arm slipped around and hugged her close to him as she dropped her head to rest on his shoulder.

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"It's not your fault, Harry," she said. The dream they had shared was still fresh in Ginny's mind, particularly the excruciating pain that had wracked her body when Voldemort had begun casting the Cruciatus Curse on Wormtail. She never realized how horribly real Harry's visions were - no wonder he always looked so ragged after experiencing one.

Harry sighed and held her tightly. "I feel terrible saying this, but I'm actually glad you were there to share it with me. I still felt helpless about it, but at least I wasn't alone."

Ginny snaked both her arms around his waist. "Don't feel bad about it. If it were me, I'd also want someone with me. It was definitely not an experience anyone suffer by themselves."

~I'd rather I suffer alone than force that upon you.~ he replied silently.

"Don't think that," she told him, squeezing him to get the point across.

"Sorry."

They lapsed into silence, satisfied to simply be in each other's presence and comforting embrace. Once again an unmeasured period of time passed, but both teenagers were too lost in their own thoughts to noticed just how long they sat there.

"So..." This time it was Ginny that broke the silence. "Draco's going to become a Death Eater."

"Can't say I'm surprised," admitted Harry.

Ginny shook her head in bewilderment. "I wouldn't have thought Tom would be that stupid. By now it would be stretching credibility to suppose that he doesn't know we can detect a Dark Mark. Even if he doesn't know that, surely someone must have told him that the Situation Map can."

Harry frowned and considered the idea. "That might be what this ceremony they were talking about is for. A way to mask the Dark Mark from detection."

"Can they do that?"

"I guess we'll find out the next time we see Malfoy."

"Should we tell someone about this?"

Harry nodded. "Yes. I'll have Hedwig deliver a message to Albus in the morning."

Ginny smirked playfully, trying to lighten the mood. "It's already morning, Harry."

"Thanks for pointing that out, Percy," retorted Harry with a teasing smile.

"Harry, I didn't know you swung that way!" Ginny clutched a hand to her chest in mock despair. "I must warn my poor, innocent brothers that you're only using me to get to them."

"You're incorrigible, do you know that?"

"I think you're mistaking me for Fred and George."

Harry chuckled and leaned forward to kiss her lightly on the lips. "I could never do that. Those two aren't nearly as dangerous as you are."

Ginny giggled and tried not to blush. "Don't forget that."

He laughed lightly and held her close. "With the Order constantly reminding me of the fact, I doubt that would be possible."

"Harry?" she turned her head to look up at him, her face oddly serious.

"Hmm?"

"I want to become an Animagus."

"That's nice. I'm sure the Order will help," Harry agreed. His eyes narrowed for a moment as he considered, then he smiled. "Sounds fun, actually, just so long as you don't blow up the Burrow first time you change. That might upset your parents."

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"Don't worry," Ginny assured him, "blowing things up is Fred and George's job."

\*\*\*

They had been sitting outside on the little hillock for several hours, half the night nearly. Around the horizon the sky was beginning to lighten as dawn approached. First the impenetrable black took on a tinge of deep blue, then a rich purple and was currently a deep pink with a hint of orange.

It was a beautiful sight. Harry, however, was having a hard time deciding if the sunrise could possibly compare to the beautiful sight resting against him.

~What are you thinking about?~

Harry continued to stare at the horizon which was starting to come alive with streaks of orange and red, while the clouds scattered here and there began to glow scarlet and gold. Pondering Ginny's question he eventually answered, *The future*.

~Are you worried?~

No.

Ginny arched her eyebrows and looked at him curiously, ~Why not?~

Harry smiled sadly and turned away from the sunrise to answer silently, *Something I've learned, Gin.*

He reached up to gently stroke a finger across Ginny's cheek before tucking a loose strand of her fiery hair behind her ear. *Don't worry about the past, because it can't be changed. Live for today and only worry about the problems at hand.*

~And the future?~

*Let the future worry about itself*, he told her with a smile. He looked back to where the sun was just beginning to crest the horizon, and could feel her own smile even though he couldn't see it.

Ginny hugged him tightly as the sun rose into view, the warm butter yellow light slowly crawling along the ground. Harry relaxed in her arms and decided to speak, saying something that he felt could only be true. An old and very dear friend had once consoled him with these words and now Harry repeated them, with only a slight modification.

"What will come, will come... and we'll meet it together."

\*\*\* Fin \*\*\*

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(A List of the various members within the Order)

European: Merlin

Joan

older, wiser version of Dumbledore.

Of Arc. Good sword fighter and strategist.

Egyptian: Osiris

Isis

the god/caretaker of the underworld

Osiris' wife and goddess of nature.

Persian: Alexander

the Great.

Greek: Heracles

Iphicles

Iolaus

commonly called Hercules.

Hercules' twin brother.

Hercules' sidekick, Iphicles' son.

Roman: Romulus

Remus

founder of Rome.

founder of Rome.

Nordic: Beowulf

Loki

Nordic dragon slayer.

Prankster.

Mayan: Quetzalcoatl

Montezuma

the god of civilization / plumed serpent

Famous king.

Asian: Sun Tzu

Miko

war lord and author of "the Art of War"

Japanese sorceress (originally called Maku)